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Need for free lunches doubles

Light House struggles to keep pantry stocked;
volunteers rise to the occasion

By ELISHA SAUERS Staff Writer

An Annapolis organization that gives out free brown-bag lunches to the needy has seen demand double in recent weeks, with many recipients being working men and women who can't make ends meet in the faltering economy.

Construction workers, security guards and food-service workers have been lining up at the Light House shelter during their lunch hours to pick up free meals, Director Maryland Baker said.

Before August, volunteers would drop off 35 to 50 prepared brown-bag lunches daily for the shelter coordinators to hand out. Many of the people were those the shelter workers had identified as "chronically homeless," Ms. Baker said.

But Ms. Baker said they're seeing a lot of new faces now.

"It's the working poor, that's how to best explain it," Ms. Baker said. "The price of gas and (Baltimore Gas & Electric Co.) bills created the big demand. A lot of these people need to get to work, so they're having to choose between filling up their gas tanks or eating lunch that day."

The crop of people seeking a free lunch swelled to between 75 and 100 a couple of months ago.



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Lawrence Coleman pops into the Light House shelter foyer to pick up a free brown-bag lunch. He is one of 100 people who received a lunch from the organization Wednesday.

Holly Mallonee, Light House's volunteer coordinator, said she began requesting 70 to 100 bags from volunteers when she observed the growing crowds of people being turned away when they would run out of their daily supply.

"We'd have to post signs on the door saying we're out of lunches," Ms. Mallonee said.

Ms. Baker added that although gas has recently dipped below \$3 per gallon, just a couple of months ago, fuel was peaking at an all-time high.

When Ms. Mallonee and Light House resident Bill Glover began distributing the lunches yesterday at 11 a.m., waves of people showed up in their work clothes or uniforms to pick up the sack of a ham-and-cheese sandwich, bottled water, banana, snack-pack and bag of chips. Adrian Taylor, who moved to Annapolis from Ohio about six months ago, was one of the first in line to pick up a bag yesterday. He said he has a part-time job with Annapolis Cleaning and tries to do odd jobs to make ends meet, but he's still struggling to get by. A decision to move back home to be closer to his family has turned out to be a difficult transition.

He said he's looking for full-time work while he stays at a friend's house on Clay Street, but he's been met with rejection with each attempt to gain employment.

"My mom told me about this place," he said as he sat on a park bench along West Street eating his sandwich. "I come here pretty much every day, and it's always something good."

He said if it weren't for the Light House and the security he felt in having at least one meal per day, he'd go hungry.

"A lot of us out here are just barely getting by," Mr. Taylor said.

Ms. Mallonee said though the shelter's pantry often is bare, volunteers are continually rising to the occasion by hosting food drives at their churches and in their neighborhoods and packing more lunches. Each time the shelter coordinators have put out calls for emergency donations, she said, members of the community have come forward to help.

Just days ago, Ms. Mallonee said the shelter hit another critical point of almost running out of food stuffs. She created a list of items that needed to be restocked and dispersed it to area volunteers, churches and organizations. Light House still is in need of many staples, and she said she hopes the community will be able to supplement its supply so the shelter can continue providing food to the needy, she said.

Sue Mikulski and her husband, Paul, are active volunteers. They recently remodeled their kitchen and said they believe packing lunches for the shelter is a way for them to share their new kitchen with others.

"It's easy (just) to write a check," Mrs. Mikulski said. "So we make lunches weekly thinking about (the recipients) as we make them and are thankful for our blessings."

One senior man with a gray beard and unsteady walk clutched a cane in one hand and a bagged lunch in the other yesterday. It was 11:30 a.m., and he had just walked all the way from Parole to downtown. He said "thank you" to the coordinators, and said he'd have to walk all the way back, too, so he needed to get going.

Agnes Vias showed up for a bag yesterday with her friend Denise Sellers and Ms. Seller's napping infant son.

Ms. Vias said her utility bills are high, and the price tags on groceries these days are making it difficult to fill her pantry. She said groceries are causing her the most financial woes lately.

"We walked here from home," Ms. Vias said. "If it wasn't for them, I'd be lost. I don't complain about nobody here."