

Editorials

In land of plenty, many are hungry

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Yes, there are many millionaires living in Nassau and Suffolk according to a new market research study, so many that we have the highest percentage of any county in the nation for net worth. Yet, amid all this wealth there are many Long Islanders who can't afford to put a meal on the table, says another study which is not as much fun to read.

Island Harvest and Long Island Cares, two major agencies that service close to 800 emergency food providers locally, took part in Hunger in America 2006, an ambitious national survey of an often-hidden problem. The survey found 259,000 Long Islanders struggling to eat. They are both young - 93,000 are children - and old - 39,000 are seniors. There are more whites than blacks or Hispanics and more than half are women. Almost half of those needing assistance have one working adult in the household and 85 percent are U.S. citizens.

What many have in common is the difficult choice of feeding their families or paying the rent, heating the house, or filling a prescription. Long Island has a fine network of food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters, almost two-thirds of them faith-based and volunteer-staffed. Almost half of these pantries turned away clients at least once because there was no food on their shelves to give.

Key suppliers to these agencies are Long Island Cares, the distributor of government bulk food and the organizer of food drives, and Island Harvest, which "rescues" food from more than 400 donors - including local farms, food wholesalers, supermarket chains, caterers and country clubs. Both agencies need more donations of commercially prepared food.

Although that extra tray of baked ziti from the Little League party doesn't qualify, volunteers and money are always needed. These are the months of barbecues and picnics, not the season that prompts us to drop off a frozen turkey and cranberry sauce. That's why this is the time of year when pantry shelves tend to be lean and the problem of hunger all the more hidden.