

LONG ISLAND

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Long Island food banks step up for the holidays as families face a 'hunger cliff'



Volunteers Jennifer Hildreth of Huntington and Lisa Muuhbauer of Melville stock shelves at the Long Island Cares food pantry in Huntington on Friday. Credit: Howard Schnapp

By Nicholas Spangler

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With Thanksgiving almost approaching, Tamira Johnson walked to the Long Island Cares food pantry in Huntington Station one morning last week, stepping gingerly because of her arthritic left knee.

The pain had affected her gait, spread to her legs and hips and forced Johnson, 49, to leave her job as an Instacart shopper nine months ago, she said. When she lost her job, she lost her car. When she lost the income she used to feed herself and her two daughters, the pantry became a precious resource.

"I had to find routes, ways" to put food on the table, she said. "They've been a big help." For Thanksgiving, she planned to cook turkey, macaroni and cheese, collard greens and devil's food cake for dessert.

Long Island's food pantries are in demand all year, but especially during the holidays.

WHAT TO KNOW

- **Long Island food bank officials** said food insecurity has worsened this holiday season.
- **Factors include inflation** and the end of some pandemic-era benefits.
- **For food banks, November and December** are among the busiest months for both collection and distribution.

Long Island Cares, one of two big food banks that serve the region – the other is Island Harvest – numbers food insecure Long Islanders, or those who live with limited or uncertain access to adequate food, at 234,000 people. That total includes 65,000 children.

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Food insecurity on the rise

For many of those Long Islanders, food insecurity is chronic and may actually be worsening, despite positives like slowing inflation and low regional unemployment.

Last year, LI Cares distributed 11.4 million tons of food through roughly 300 food pantries it supplies across the region and the five pantries it operates. By the end of October this year, it already had distributed 11.7 million tons. Its five pantries alone fed 115,969 people last year. Island Harvest delivered 16 million pounds of food last year; it helps feed roughly 168,000 people per month, 25% more than it did before the COVID pandemic.

The state Comptroller's Office warned in a report last spring that the problem could be exacerbated by the end of pandemic-era help like stimulus checks, the end of the Child Tax Credit expansion and [increased assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) and others.

SNAP excludes many needy Long Island households that make too little to ensure regular access to food but too much to meet income requirements. In March when Congress ended the pandemic-era emergency allotments, 1.6 million New York families faced a "hunger cliff," according to Washington, D.C.-based Food Research & Action Center. Those families lost an average of \$82 per month in SNAP benefits, leaving funding for about \$6 per person per day. Some older adults who qualified only for minimum assistance saw their benefits drop from \$281 to \$23, according to the center.

As those benefits lapsed, the families using Long Island's food banks also faced an end to pandemic-era grace periods on some bills and unpredictable prices for many goods, including necessities like food and fuel.

While the Consumer Price Index slowed to 3.2% in October, higher rates over the last year made it "a really scary time for people," Island Harvest CEO Randi Shubin Dresner said. "Families were having to make very tough choices: whether to go to the doctor and pay the copay or buy new shoes for the children because they're growing or put extra money into buying food."

[Long Island's poverty rate](#) of 5.9% is well below state and national rates. But experts say the federal poverty threshold of \$29,678 for a family of four is inadequate for [Long Island's high cost of living](#). A report this fall by United Way of Long Island set a more realistic household "survival budget" at \$76,932 in Nassau and \$79,668 in Suffolk. The report determined that 29.4% of households here — 118,911 in Nassau County and 166,268 in Suffolk County — "are struggling to afford these basic needs," such as housing, food, child care and transportation.

In a recent news release, Island Harvest said lines at some distribution centers stretched to 200 cars.

Higher costs for food banks

The food banks too are facing higher costs. Dresner said her organization felt it earlier this year in gas costs for the fleet of 26 trucks it uses to make deliveries around the Island. Jessica Rosati, vice president for programs at Long Island Cares, said she'd seen it in the deals the food bank cuts for its massive purchases of fruit, vegetables and proteins — this year, for instance, they paid \$50,000 for 9,000 turkeys — with prices per pound rising from 80 cents before the pandemic to \$1.26 now.

"Our purchasing power doesn't go as far as it once did," she said, even as the food bank has added 2,781 clients since March. "Everybody thought that after COVID, everything had bottomed out. But, no — there's been a steady rise." The biggest categories of Long Island Care's clients can be described as working poor, followed by seniors, she said.

November and December are the busiest months of the year for food banks, as they face increased demand from families planning holiday celebrations and increased interest from donors and volunteers.

Dresner spent Friday at Bethpage Federal Credit Union headquarters for what Island Harvest billed as “Long Island’s largest one-day frozen turkey and food drive.” Roughly midway through the 10½-hour day, she said Long Islanders had dropped off more than 3,500 frozen turkeys that the group would distribute over the weekend and Monday.

Rosati spent Thursday outside Suffolk County offices in Hauppauge at a turkey distribution event for veterans sponsored by PSEG, one of her group’s corporate partners. Thanksgiving, she said, “is our Super Bowl — it’s when hunger resonates for people, and it’s an opportunity to do a lot of good for a lot of people.”

But for at least one client that day, hunger didn’t follow such a neat schedule. Howard Wunderlich, 62, of Ronkonkoma, is retired from the Army Reserves and living on disability after noncombat injuries got him airlifted out of Kuwait City, ending his career in 2005.

He said his visits to the food bank coincided with due dates for big bills like heating oil. He drove a 2002 vehicle — “old, like me” — and said the last time he’d run out of money for food was when he had to pay a \$1,000 mechanic’s bill after it broke down.

He ate food from his freezer for a week or two until he got his check, he said.

With the food he picked up Thursday he said he’d eat on Thanksgiving, though with his nearest family two states away, he’ll be spending the holiday alone.

He buys what he can on sale and, mindful of his health, buys natural, rather than processed foods. There are times, he said, when he’d like to eat filet mignon and caviar, but “You don’t miss what you don’t have.”

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