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The following pertains to mailed subscriptions as required by the USPS:

ISSN 0278-5587 (print) ISSN 2643-9417 (online) is published daily except Sunday and Christmas Day by Newsday LLC, 6 Corporate Center Drive, Melville, NY 11747. Periodicals postage paid at Huntington Station, NY. Postmaster: Send address changes to 6 Corporate Center Drive, Melville, NY 11747.

## TOP STORIES

# Struggle to

### LI food banks see more need for emergency help

BY OLIVIA WINSLOW

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For Khatiasier "Kay" Mardice, getting the best food value for her family means making calculations about which store to patronize for items on her shopping list.

She does a majority of her shopping at BJ's Wholesale Club in Riverhead "because it just works out cheaper to buy in bulk when you have children," said Mardice, 42, a divorced mother of three school-age children who lives in Calverton. And because of her BJ's membership, she also saves at the store's gas station — about 10 cents per gallon. "So," she said, "it's like a double-whammy" of savings.

Mardice is like many Long Islanders: Having enough cash for food has become a growing problem, including for plenty of working people, according to local government and non-profit officials. Food pantries report more people seeking emergency food aid. Some officials pointed to what they viewed as the inadequacy of government policies to help people in need.

During a grocery shopping trip on March 8, the day she received her food stamp allotment, Mardice spent \$288.25 at BJ's. She saved \$76 through store discounts and coupons.

"That's how I shop every month there," she said. "That's



Paul Gilday, of Massapequa Park, is a 65-year-old widower who is disabled and struggles for food security for himself and his son.

## FEELING THE SQUEEZE

how I stretch my food stamps."

Mardice said she receives \$825 a month in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, the federally funded program commonly called food stamps. She also gets Section 8 housing assistance.

"I don't really have any extra leeway, as far as buying food, because I don't have the income outside of child support, which I have to pay my other bills," said Mardice, who last worked in 2020 — at a nonprofit preschool program that paid \$15 an hour. That, she added, didn't cover child care costs and other expenses.

Her food stamp benefit back then was much smaller, less than \$100 a month, she said.

### Higher-than-average prices

And then came the COVID-19 pandemic, ushering in a lockdown of the preschool and her job as a family advocate, which entailed going into homes. "So, the food stamps really buy the bulk of my food for the month . . .," Mardice said. "It gets very expensive when you have to spend cash, especially when you don't have the cash."

A report last year by the Suffolk County Legislature's Welfare to Work Commission determined that the true definition of poverty on Long Island, based on the costs of housing, food, transportation and basic necessities, should be \$55,000

## High cost of caring for kids

### CHILD CARE from A3

cially unfeasible for me to stay within this field."

New York State is slowly acknowledging and trying to improve the situation, said Albitz, of the Empire State Campaign for Child Care, which is pushing for free universal child care. "We try to make incremental progress toward

our goal every year," she said.

For instance, the state raised the income caps twice this year. It's an all-or-nothing situation — either a family qualifies for the subsidy or it doesn't; if the family does, they only pay a copay, Albitz said. There's no sliding scale for subsidy. The campaign had also hoped for funding that would add \$12,500 to

each child care employee's salary, but only \$2,000 a year wage supplement was approved, Albitz said.

"There's very little wiggle room in a child care business plan," Rojas said. "You can't raise what you pay unless you raise parent fees, so we're stuck in this cycle. It's a business structure that isn't working anymore."



# put meals on table



**Khatisier Mardice of Calverton stretches her \$825 per month from SNAP for her family of four.**

for a family of four. However, the official federal poverty level, which determines who is eligible for government benefits, including food stamps, is just \$30,000 in 2023 for a family of four — up from \$27,750 in 2022.

The official poverty level does not consider regional cost differences, which hurts a high-cost region like Long Island. The federal poverty level, established in the mid-1960s, is only updated for inflation.

"There needs to be regulatory changes," Nassau Social Services Commissioner Nancy Nunziata said. "They've increased the poverty level a little bit, but it's still way too low. There're still too many

people who would not qualify for help based on those numbers. I think we have to realistically look at what it costs for food."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's May "Food Price Outlook 2023" summary said: "Food prices are expected to grow more slowly in 2023 than in 2022 but still at above historical-average rates. In 2023, all food prices are predicted to increase 6.2 percent."

For Mardice, being prepared for any emergency drives her to keep her pantry stocked. She has cabinets for cereals, packages of rice and pasta that are labeled. She even keeps what she calls "bug-out bags" for her children behind a couch in her

townhouse, filled with items including cereal, oatmeal, granola bars and tuna — and even a change of clothing and a flashlight.

She does it in case "something catastrophic happens . . . Say a tree falls on my house," Mardice said, noting she lives in a wooded area with only one way in and out. "We had a huge fire here a couple of years ago. I said, 'Guys, we might have to get out of here.' So in a situation like that, we grab our bags and go."

Therefore, food shopping is critical. After BJ's, Mardice's next stops are at Walmart and Aldi. She gets a "bigger bang for my buck" at Walmart for cer-

tain foods and snacks for her children. Her bill there: \$98.45. And "Aldi is the best store when you're someone struggling financially for food," Mardice said. "You can get meats for a fraction" of what it costs at other stores. The bill: \$47.55.

As a last resort, if she's running low on food and food stamps, she'll go to Long Island Cares' Hampton Bays food pantry, which she said "has really good quality food."

"I don't really like to go unless I really need it because I think I'm taking from people that truly need it" who may not have food stamps, she said.

## Increased need for food aid

Paul Gilday, a 65-year-old widower who is disabled from his days as a commercial and residential mover, sought out an Island Harvest food pantry for the first time last year, at the suggestion of a local church and family members.

He usually goes twice a week. Gilday and his son, John, 28, who has Down syndrome, live on disability benefits, and Gilday's son receives \$174 a month in food stamps, not enough to meet their nutritional needs. So, food pantries are essential in his time of financial crisis.

He has put his Massapequa Park home up for sale and is looking for a cheaper place to live, perhaps upstate. "I cannot let me go into the streets — me and my son. I just cannot allow it," Gilday said.

He's been adrift since his wife, Elly Rose Gilday, died in 2020.

"My wife used to handle everything, all the bills — everything," said Gilday, a U.S. Army veteran. "Just before she passed away, she was starting to show me how to do things . . . And even then I was like, 'It makes no sense to me' . . . I just made a lot of mistakes . . . I had a lot of people try to help me, family members. It just got to be overwhelming."

The Island's two large food banks — Island Harvest Food Bank and Long Island Cares-The Harry Chapin Regional Food Bank — report an increase in demand for emergency food assistance. In addition to operating their own pantries, they each distribute

food to about 300 member agencies with pantries.

"Food insecurity is the result of something else," said Randi Shubin Dresner, president and chief executive of Island Harvest. "We really think areas we all collectively need to work on [are] income inequality and financial security." That has led her organization to start its Workforce Skills Development Institute, a job training program to help people earn better wages.

Paule T. Pachter, president and chief executive of Long Island Cares, said there was a 59.3% increase in the number of people coming to the food bank's six satellite locations across the Island the first three months of this year compared to the same period last year.

"These are crisis numbers," Pachter said. "I think we have to look at the cost of living on Long Island . . . The economy on Long Island, when it comes to housing, is not sustainable for people who are struggling."

Pachter also noted the impact of the federal government ending, on March 1, extra food stamp allotments that recipients had received during the pandemic.

"Everyone was getting the maximum benefit" during the pandemic, Suffolk County Department of Social Services Commissioner Frances Pierre said of SNAP, which for a household of four was \$939 monthly, officials said.

Pierre said the department has seen a "large increase" in the number of applications for SNAP benefits — growing from "the norm" of around 2,000 per month to about 3,100 per month this year. She suspects "higher-than-ever" food prices is one reason.

Cathy Demerato, executive director of the Center for Advocacy, Support and Transformation in Southold, said during the pandemic that her agency "saw a lot of people who never needed help before." Her agency provides food relief and other aid to low-income residents of the North Fork and Shelter Island.

"Now we're seeing people who are really struggling because of the high cost of food, housing and utilities," she said.