

Food banks still seeing record demand postshutdown

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While food banks are beginning to recover following the longest government shutdown in history, officials say they are still experiencing record numbers of clients due to rising costs.

Ohio Association of Foodbanks Executive Director Joree Novotny said food banks and pantries statewide have started to see a plateau in visits since the government shutdown ceased, with more visitors than previous years.

“We’re definitely seeing — as we have every month throughout the year — much higher-than-average numbers of folks coming to our food pantries for help with groceries,” she said in an interview.

“We’ve had a few years of higher-than-normal costs and household expenses and basic needs exceeding growth in income, and that spells challenges for families that are living paycheck to paycheck,” she added.

She made a comparison to the COVID-19 pandemic, which she said may have been less severe than the 43-day shutdown due to the lapse in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) funding on Nov. 1.

“In reflection...it was even more sharp, sudden and significant than COVID, in some ways, because it was taking dollars immediately out of the pockets of families that otherwise would have counted on those funds to go to their local grocery store to buy the food they need needed,” Novotny said.

Mike Hochron, senior vice president of communications for the Mid-Ohio Food Collective, said the organization is likewise experiencing record numbers.

“This past year, MOFC’s network of 600+ agency partners and programs has been serving more than 5,000 families per day,” according to Hochron. “This compares to approximately 3,000 families per day just three years earlier.”

Despite the increase in visits in recent years, Hochron said the collective is recovering from the government shutdown, which intensified the normal holiday surge in demand.

“The holidays are always a really busy season — especially Thanksgiving in particular is always our busiest time of year,” he said. “Both just due to the normal spike of families coming for help that time of year and then the recovery from the government shutdown...throughout the end of November, numbers were really high.”

Ohio Job and Family Services Directors' Association Executive Director Jon Honeck said county agencies appear to be fully recovered from the shutdown and remain active trying to fill any lingering gaps impacting food banks.

“I think our agencies are back to normal,” he said. “They're functioning, the doors are open and we're receiving applications. And for us, we're doing business as usual.

“We represent all of the county JFS agencies in our association, so the collaboration is going to look a little bit different from county to county, but certainly the food banks and food pantries are a valued partner, and our agencies are happy to refer folks over to those agencies,” Honeck added.

Both Hochron and Novotny credited the state's assistance and the increase in volunteers over recent months for helping to serve as many families as possible.

“I would say that we're really proud of a long-standing, decades-long partnership between charitable hunger relief providers and our partners in local and state government,” Novotny said.

“I think that was on true display in our collective response to pressure that families were facing during the recent federal government shutdown and the suspension of SNAP benefits, where we saw a combination of generous volunteers giving of their time, generous food donors and individual donors.”

Novotny, however, noted some lingering uncertainty, saying that future efforts will focus on the One Big Beautiful Bill Act's potential impacts on the SNAP program.

“I think that in the next couple of years, there's a lot on the horizon for Ohioans and their ability to be able to afford the food that they need and also for their other basic expenses,” she said. “We saw during the federal government shutdown what the lack of access to SNAP benefits meant immediately to the food security of many, many seniors and families.”