

Hungry together:

Free suppers and food pantries across the region offer fellowship and some relief from stigma of being in need



Volunteers gather bags of supplies to be distributed at First Parish in Concord by Open Table, a regional group that organizes food pantries and free meals. (Photos By Yoon S. Byun/Globe Staff)

By [Calvin Hennick](#)

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Lisa Richards, a Framingham resident, works two jobs, one as a personal care attendant and another driving a van for senior citizens. Acton resident Julie Neubauer works part time in retail. Virginia Loftus, also of Acton, receives a disability pension.

All three women bring in some sort of income, but all three still need help putting food on the table.

“I know if I lose a few hours here and there, that makes a big difference,” said Neubauer, whose work hours have been cut lately. “That could be \$100, \$200; that can be the difference between having enough money for groceries.”

Neubauer talked about her situation between bites of bread pudding, served as dessert at a free weekly supper provided by Open Table, a nonprofit group operating in Concord and Maynard. On this evening, around 120 people packed the room at First Parish in Concord for hot tuna casserole, and take-home pantry items like coffee and cereal.

Unemployment in Massachusetts has been dropping since the beginning of the year, but September’s figure of 8.4 percent suggests there are still many people yet to see any benefits of a recovery.

Antihunger organization Project Bread reported that 615,000 people across the state are struggling to put food on the table, an 11 percent increase over last year. The most recent federal numbers found 10 percent of Bay State residents experiencing some level of “food insecurity” last year. That’s up from 7.1 percent in 2002.

Anecdotal reports from food pantries in area communities back up the numbers. Open Table has seen increased demand in the past year at both of its locations. The Brookline Food Pantry expects a 25 percent increase in demand this year. The Newton Food Pantry is assisting nearly twice as many people as it was a year ago.

“Yes, the economy has turned around, but if you look in low-income communities, they tend to be slower to come back,” said Ellen Parker, executive director of Project Bread. “The income gap is bigger in Massachusetts than almost anywhere else.”

“We’re a little bit shocked by how much more desperate people are than they were in the past,” said Peter Hilton, president of Open Table.

He said his organization has worked with seven families this year who have become homeless.

“People who had modest jobs, some of them have lost them,” Hilton said. “There’s certainly a feeling of more need among the families who come.”

Yet for all the anxiety, spirits seemed high at the recent Open Table supper. Volunteers zipped around delivering second helpings, and tables buzzed with social chatter.

“This is my night out,” said Jo Sullivan, who lives in Concord. “Everyone is so wonderful and so grateful for everything they have.”

“I’ve made a lot of good friends,” said Neubauer. “They’ve been really supportive.”

“It isn’t just the food,” said fellow Acton resident Loftus. “It’s the social interactions. Most of the people in this room, I know their stories.”

Loftus said she has noticed more people coming to the suppers lately, and many of the newcomers are well-dressed and appear to be on their way from work.

“They’re trying to use money they would have used on food for mortgages, heating bills, fuel,” she said. “The fact that this is available has made a huge dent.”

“It’s a lot of different kinds of people coming,” said volunteer Lyn Zurbrigg. “People who didn’t think they would ever be here are finding they need to come. I think often you stereotype a place like Concord because you wouldn’t think there are people in need, but there are.

“Once you get into that type of a situation, it’s not something that just heals instantly,” Zurbrigg added. “It takes a while.”

Susanne Jarnryd, another volunteer, said people often put off seeking help from food pantries until they have exhausted all their other options.

“They’ve run through their unemployment or their family resources or their friends, and the need is still there,” she said.

Jean, who declined to give her last name because many of her friends don’t know she relies on Open Table for food, said there is sometimes a stigma attached to seeking help.

“I never imagined that I would be in a position where I would have to come to suppers and rely on a food pantry,” she said. “I found it very traumatic when I first came here, but I’ve found it’s a very important form of support.”

Jackie Colby, the Newton Food Pantry’s president, said people tend to be generous with their donations during the holiday season, but supplies begin to dwindle after that.

“This time of year, people remember us,” Colby said. “Starting in the spring, we don’t get quite as many donations. We are open all year, and we need food all year.”

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