MEAL DEMAND SOARS

Call for emergency food is highest in Bronx, up 110%

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THE BRONX HAS seen a staggering 110% spike in the number of emergency meals provided to hungry residents in the past two years — the highest increase in the city — according to a recent report on hunger.

The report from the office of Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand shows a dramatic 55% rise in the need for emergency food relief statewide, and a 75% increase in New York City overall.

The number of emergency meals provided to the city's hungry has jumped in every borough since 2006, with the Bronx topping the list at 110%, followed closely by Queens at 106%. The smallest increase was 29% for Staten Island.

The report found that 340,000 households across the city are now considered “food insecure” — meaning that these families are unsure when or how they will get their next meal — with 53,285 in the Bronx.

"Because of the bad economy, New York families that typically donate food, warm clothes and other basics to those in need just can’t afford to this year,” Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) said. "As a result, food bank shelves have gone bare, and hunger and food insecurity have reached disturbing, historic highs."

The Food Bank for New York City, which supplies food to 1,000 agencies providing 500,000 meals a day, found that 93% of city food pantries have seen an increase in first-time visitors over the past year. Half of the pantries reported more than 25% in increased demand over last year.

Emergency measures taken in Washington over the past year dramatically increased the availability of food stamps and government purchases of food for emergency relief programs, according to Triada Stamps, the Food Bank's director of government relations and public education. But those measures failed to fill the gap in the city.

"More than half of food pantries still had to turn people away because they ran out of food,” Stamps said.

Worse, much of that extra funding will disappear in the next year, long before recession-wrecked New York families recover.

The city received $28 million in aid from the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program this year, for example, but is set to receive only half of that over the next year, according to Stamps.

To prevent this, Gillibrand is pushing legislation in Washington for double funding for the Emergency Food Assistance Program in the future.

"We need to make sure we’re helping children and families who were hit the hardest by this economy,” Gillibrand said.

In addition, both Gillibrand and Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) are co-sponsoring legislation to make permanent the Good Samaritan Hunger Relief Tax Incentive that encourages businesses to donate unused food items to food banks.

Another piece of legislation Gillibrand is co-sponsoring to help support food pantries and other charities is an extension of tax credits for seniors when they make charitable donations from their retirement savings. Such credits are set to expire at the end of this year.

To locate emergency food pantries all over the city, call the NYC Hunger Hotline at (866) 888-8777.