

Alaska food banks see more hunger as aid delayed

High prices, food stamp backlog contribute to need

By Annie Berman, Anchorage Daily News

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More than 10,000 Alaskans have been waiting months for the state to approve and administer their food stamp benefits. (Shawn Goldberg/Dreamstime)

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska — The Food Bank of Alaska is reporting unprecedented levels of food insecurity this year amid rising food costs statewide and major food stamp backlogs at the state Division of Public Assistance.

Officials at those agencies say \$4.5 million in state aid earmarked for food banks and pantries in Gov. Mike Dunleavy's proposed state budget among other fixes could help.

But the aid won't come soon enough for the more than 10,000 Alaskans currently waiting months for the state to approve and administer their food stamp benefits, after the state again fell behind on processing applications.

Alaska Health Commissioner Heidi Hedberg said last week that it would likely take the state at least three months to clear its latest backlog, which is affecting approximately one in nine people who qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

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For some families, it's the second time in less than a year they've had to rely heavily on food banks and pantries as the state fell severely behind on processing the federally funded public assistance benefits. That original backlog was first reported by multiple news outlets last December.

Added to rising food costs, the backlogs are a significant factor in driving up demand from the charity sector, straining its ability to help fill the growing need.

"We've not run out of food yet, but that is on our horizon," said Hannah Hill, executive director of Bread Line Inc., a soup kitchen in Fairbanks that has already distributed more food this year than any in its 40-year history.

The nonprofit has seen a huge increase in need over the last year, and has had to rely on one-time funding from the state to help meet demand, Hill said.

“We’re very good at stretching what we have. We’re very good at using lentils in a million creative ways. It just becomes increasingly more difficult,” Hill said.

More need, less food

“Every month since October 2022 has been the busiest that month has ever been for us,” said Hill. “So it has just been constant record-breaking.”

That’s a refrain the Food Bank of Alaska has been hearing all over the state, month after month. said Cara Durr, its CEO.

“It’s hard, because I know, it sounds like a broken record: The need keeps rising. But that is truly the experience that we’re having,” Durr said.

In Alaska, around one in eight residents were enrolled in the food stamps program before the backlogs. More than two-thirds of SNAP recipients in Alaska have children in their families, and most have incomes below the federal poverty line.

In Anchorage, before the first SNAP backlog began last year, Catholic Social Services served 80 households a month as part of its food pantry distributions. During the backlog, that number grew to 120, said the organization’s chief executive officer, Robin Dempsey.

“And that number has stayed high the whole year,” she said, adding that she’s heard from clients who had to decide between paying for food or rent.

Some of the need appears to be driven by the rising cost of living.

Although food prices declined slightly this year compared to the year before, inflation caused food costs in Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley to rise by more than 20 percent since 2020, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

That’s in line with national statistics: Food insecurity across the country rose by nearly 3 percent in 2022 from the previous year, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In Alaska, at the same time inflation was pushing up the cost of food, tens of thousands of Alaskans who qualify for SNAP were stuck waiting months for the state to process their benefits, causing a 69 percent drop in participation in the program over a single year.

Durr said data on food security by state is often delayed, and doesn’t yet show the full scale of the problem that agency and its partners have been observing in Alaska over the last year.

Data that the food bank typically relies on from the national nonprofit Feeding America currently shows that about 1 in 10 Alaskans are food insecure, but Durr said it’s likely the number is currently much higher.

At the same time that agencies around the state are reporting record demand for food, they also have less food to distribute, Durr said.

In fiscal year 2022, the Food Bank of Alaska distributed more than 11 million pounds of food. In FY 2023, that number fell to just 7 million, despite the increased need, said Durr.

That drop was likely due to a drop in donations from local grocery chains, and a decrease in a federal commodities program that supplies much of the food bank's food, Durr said.

A 'tremendous investment'

Durr said she was glad to see the line items in Dunleavy's budget last week that includes \$4.5 million to bolster aid at local food banks and pantries around Alaska: "I think this will be tremendously helpful," she said.

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And while Durr said it was too soon to know exactly how that money would be spent, typically \$1 million in aid can buy around 600,000 pounds of food, which means \$4.5 million could translate to around 2.7 million pounds of food.

Given that last year, the Food Bank of Alaska distributed about 7 million pounds of food, the new increase would be significant, she said.

Durr said being able to budget for purchasing food rather than relying on donations could also mean better food options.

"We get a lot of feedback from our partners on the types of food that their clients like," she said. "So when we're able to purchase food, as opposed to rely on a government commodities program or grocery donations, we have total say in the types of food that we're purchasing."

More than a year of delays

By Saturday, nearly 11,000 Alaskans had been waiting as long as six months for the state to process their SNAP benefits applications, according to Shirley Sakaye, a spokesperson for the Alaska Department of Health.

Advocates who have been helping clients navigate the original SNAP backlog since around August 2022 said it's hard to believe they're still hearing about the same delays.

“When we started seeing an increase in our SNAP caseload about a year ago, I think we had no idea that we would still be working on this issue to the degree that we are, one year in,” said Leigh Dickey, an attorney at Alaska Legal Services Corp., which provides free legal assistance to low-income Alaskans.

Dickey said the agency has processed more requests for help with SNAP applications than any other issue this year.

“Historically, this has been a very weird, unprecedented shift for us,” she said. “Usually, we are doing lots of variety in our caseload — lots of evictions, domestic violence, protective orders, and things like that.”

Since the beginning of 2023, the agency has helped more than 2,700 Alaskans without benefits file Fair Hearing Requests — a process Alaskans whose applications are stuck in the backlog are entitled to — that can help push their applications to the top of the pile.

That's “four times more cases than any other type that we usually see,” she said.

In November, the agency hit a record number of calls for help: more than 600, Dickey said. “And it seems like we're on pace to do that again in December. The volume has been insane.”

Fixes at the state

State officials have said they're working on fixes to end the backlog and prevent future ones — including rolling out an online benefits application by the end of December, increasing hours that local public assistance offices are open, bolstering staffing and overhauling an outdated, inefficient IT system by the end of 2024.

Dunleavy's proposed budget includes \$8.8 million for 30 new, long-term, nonpermanent eligibility technicians at the division.

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