

## 'Hunger in Lake County' continues to be a concern

*By John Arthur Hutchison, The News-Herald*

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Hunger continues to be a big problem in Northeast Ohio as more than 574,000 people turn to food programs each year, according to a comprehensive study of domestic hunger released jointly by food banks, including the Greater Cleveland Food Bank.

About 40 people, including public officials and representatives of religious, nonprofit, and social service organizations, attended a discussion called "Hunger in Lake County" on Aug. 27 at St. Noel Church in Willoughby Hills. The event was presented by the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, which serves Lake, Geauga, Cuyahoga, Ashtabula, Ashland and Richland counties.

Featured speakers during the 90-minute program were Mary O'Shea of the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, Matt Battiato of Lake County Job and Family Services, Diana Lipfird of Society of Mother Teresa in Willoughby, and Jean Sency of United Way of Lake County.

O'Shea said the community discussion was the first forum her agency has conducted since the study called "Hunger in America 2014" was released Aug. 18.

She said a key finding showed one in eight people in the six counties turn to local hunger centers for food assistance and more than 39 million meals were provided in 2013.

A primary cause for hunger is because the economy has not rebounded in Ohio like it has in other parts of the country, O'Shea said.

Many people who used to have high-paying jobs either are unemployed or work at jobs that now pay them less and may involve fewer hours worked, forcing them to make tough choices and trade-offs to keep food on the table, she said.

Other key findings show about 75 percent of people served by local hunger centers live at or below poverty level (\$19,530 for a family of three in 2013), and 50 percent live below the deep poverty level of \$9,765 for a family of three in 2013, and 44 percent of people served are children and seniors.

Many clients struggle with health issues such as diabetes and high blood pressure that consume their financial resources, O'Shea said.

"Ohio is still 129,000 jobs behind than from when the recession began (in 2008)," she said. "People are suffering more deeply than years ago."

Battiato said about \$35 million annually is distributed by the JFS Department to eligible Lake County residents through state and federally funded programs for food assistance programs.

He said the volume of people who seek public food assistance has generally stopped increasing, but it's not really decreasing either.

However, that may change somewhat because of a relatively new state policy that now limits the length of time for state and federal public food assistance distributed by the county JFS Department to people who are classified as "able-bodied adults without dependents" who are ages 18 through 49, he said.

Adults who fit all the criteria of this classification that includes a range of exceptions are able to receive food assistance benefits distributed through the county JFS Department for three months of a 36-month time frame that begins during the first full month of benefits, Battiato said. However, when three month of benefits are obtained, these adults must work or participate in a work program for at least 80 hours per month to continue to receive food assistance benefits.

"A lot of these people are going to start showing up at food pantries," he said.

Lipfird said the Immaculate Conception Parish in Willoughby, through its Society of Mother Teresa's food program, has seen a big increase in people who seek food assistance with about 35 to 40 people are served daily.

"A lot of people are working, but just don't have enough money for food," she said.

Parishioners also have been hit with tougher times as the church hasn't received as many donations for the program because people can't afford to give.

Sency said the county's median age continues to increase as 22.4 percent of the population was 60 or older in 2010 with a projection to about 30 percent in 2020.

She said the demand for food assistance continues to be high as the Lake County Council on Aging, which receives funding from United Way Lake County, provided 197,000 meals to 2,300 seniors last year.

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