

FOOD INSECURITY

Eggstremely Bad News for Food Pantries

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

It used to be that eggs were cheap protein. Not anymore according to Charles Meng, CEO of Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC), and Sally Diaz Wells, Social Justice and Outreach Minister of Our Lady Queen of Peace Church (OLQP). Meng says, “I have a challenge.”

In an interview for a local TV station a few days ago Meng pointed out that inflation is crippling families. “I am feeding 22 percent more families than at the same time last year.”

In AFAC’s monthly newsletter Meng said for the last six months the number of families coming to AFAC has increased by about 100 to 2,776 families the week of Jan. 9. This translates into 6,900 individuals which he says is higher than the pandemic. And everything costs more.

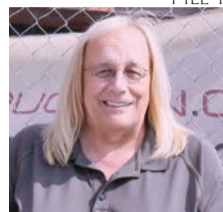
Part of the problem is the price of eggs which he has seen skyrocket due to inflation and to a bird flu outbreak. “The amount of money it takes to keep these shelves stocked with eggs ...” Meng says at the beginning of 2022 they were purchasing eggs at \$16.95 for a case of 15 dozen. “Last week we spent \$66.70 a case for the 180 cases needed each week for our families. At this rate what was an annual cost for eggs of \$125,000 will grow to over \$465,000 a year.”

Sally Diaz, Social Justice and Outreach Minister, Our Lady Queen of Peace says the OLQP weekly church pantry which serves about 600 families a week has seen egg prices double. “It has really become so difficult. It has become a strain for our small pantry.” She says OLQP runs a small pantry on Wednesdays that gives food to anyone who presents themselves with a need.

Egg prices are already on the rise according to the USDA Egg Market Report from a low of about \$1.40 per dozen in March 2022 to a national average of \$3.26 in January 2023. This is due not just to the normal inflation but compounded by avian flu spreading among many birds in the United States. In particular commercial layer chickens in Iowa, Maryland, South Dakota and Wisconsin have been affected. Iowa has 12 million endangered layer chickens, producing the most in the country. According to the Center for Disease Control, more than 57 million birds have been affected by the illness so far.

Meng points out that they have served 68,000 to date in the six months between July 1-December 31. “And we have a half year to go. So that means there might be 125,000 visits to us by July 2023.” He adds that it’s not just eggs; a half gallon of milk used to be \$1.36, and now it’s \$1.96—a 44 percent increase in six months. Chicken was 59 cents a pound; now it’s 95 cents a pound. “We need 2,700 half gallons of milk a week for our 2,700 families. It sounds like a small increase but when you multiply it, all of a sudden it becomes real dollars.”

In addition to costs going up, some benefits are going down. SNAP benefits will be



Charles Meng, CEO
Arlington Food
Assistance Center



Sally Diaz, Social
Justice and
Outreach Minister,
Our Lady Queen
of Peace



Cost for each case of eggs for AFAC up from \$16.95 to \$66.70 last week for 180 cases needed each week.

reduced when the supplemental emergency SNAP benefits put in place during Covid expire. During the Covid public health emergency many individuals receiving SNAP food assistance received temporary increased food benefits. These benefits expire in February which will result in 5,480 households or 9,285 individuals in Arlington losing the supplemental SNAP benefits.

Stephanie Hopkins, Food Assistance Coordinator at the Department of Human Services, says senior citizens will suffer the greatest burden from this loss of supplemental benefits. “The minimum SNAP benefit, the amount a lot of older citizens receive, is \$23. The emergency SNAP benefits took them up to \$281 a month.” The loss of the supplemental benefit will return them to \$23 a month.

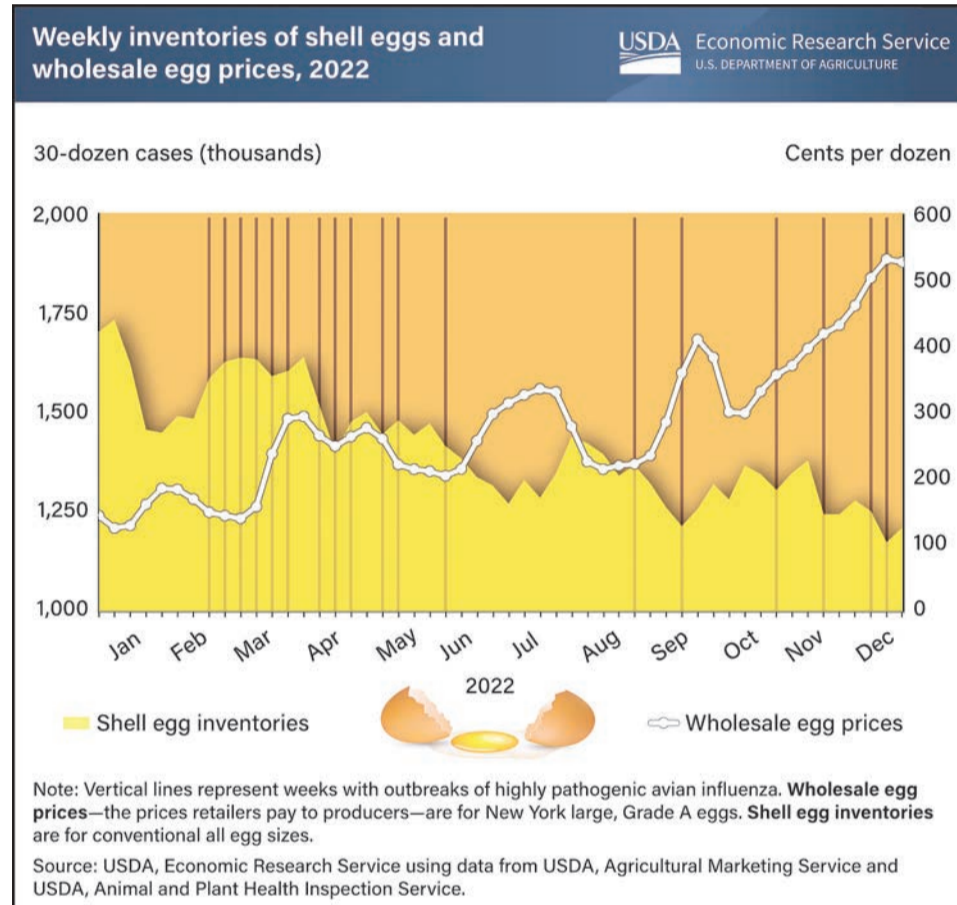
Hopkins says there is a bill in the Virginia legislature which would make \$20.4 million available from the general fund for persons aged 60 and older in the amount of \$25 per month using the Federal SNAP criteria.

In addition, she says they are working on a flyer in eight languages to be sent out to households through the mail with information about the SNAP benefits and available food pantries. Also there will be a letter coming straight from Richmond. For general questions about food assistance call 703-228-1300 or for questions if enrolled in SNAP call 703-228-1350.

FILE PHOTOS BY SHIRLEY RUHE



AFAC clients line up at the AFAC central location on S. Nelson Street for supplemental food assistance.



Plan for Hunger in Arlington

In May 2022 Arlington released a new report “Improving Food Security and Access in Arlington Virginia.” The report researched food security efforts, barriers to accessing services, best practices from other communities, data collection and reporting and outreach opportunities. It indicated that 7.1 percent or 16,670 individuals in Arlington experience food insecurity. The disparity in rates was significant ranging from 14.6 percent along the west end of Columbia Pike to zero in other areas of Arlington.

The report was the product of a task force that identified a number of issues and set out goals for the future. Meng pointed out at the time that a number of recommendations were directed at the County “and my question to them is do they have the funds or the desire to make changes.” He said eight months later he still has the same question.

Meng said that unlike the funding mechanisms used in most counties to support programs addressing food insecurity, in Arlington the County provides only \$555,000 out of the AFAC yearly budget of \$8 million. In addition, he is concerned about a new process the County is proposing to require all non-profits to undergo a competitive grant

process to receive funding.

Hopkins, coordinator of the study, kicked off the Arlington County Food Security Strategic Plan, which resulted from the study, with a presentation at the Central Library on Jan. 23. The study establishes a Food Security Coalition and sets up Arlington’s first strategic food insecurity plan. “There is a lot of work to be done. We have an open door policy. No one department can do it all. Anyone who wants to help can.” Hopkins says the Coalition will look at specific strategies and how to connect the dots.”

Hopkins says they have three working groups who will address food access, outreach and systemic change. “For instance we want to share information in useful ways. Everyone doesn’t access information in the same way. Different populations have said “send a flyer to my door,” while others want a message on What’s App, and others say, “it it’s on my phone I won’t look at it.”

Systemic change will look at long-term issues with advocacy at the state or local level. “For instance, we can’t control changes in SNAP benefits, WIC and school meals. Hopkins says this plan will probably take 3-5 years to implement. “We’re not going to solve all of this tomorrow.”