

The cupboard's getting bare

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By Donita Naylor

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WESTERLY — Terry Tarallo, a volunteer for the food pantry based at Immaculate Conception Church, on High Street, said the pantry ran out twice last month and has been “overrun with people in need.”

“We continue to see an almost daily increase” in requests, with 70 people asking for help in the last month, he said. “We’ll continue to rely on donations,” he said, “as the need outstrips” what he and 15 other volunteers can supply.

One of about 30 people meeting at Grace United Methodist Church to share problems and resources as the Basic Needs Network, Tarallo also said that, with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence fuel assistance money exhausted, “We’re at the point where people won’t have access to oil.”

That concern was answered by Maureen Tissiere, who said South County Community Action (789-3016) was distributing fuel money from the Salvation Army Good Neighbor Fund.

Another food pantry, Living Supplies, at Christ Church, on Elm Street, saw its clientele doubling and then returning two weeks earlier than the prescribed every other month. Ernest Greenwood said people were coming in with referrals they had photocopied, and he urged other agencies to sign their referral sheets so that copies can be detected.

Kathy Stedman, who moderated the meeting in the absence of the Rev. Jean Barry of the WARM (Westerly Area Rest, Meals) Shelter, said that in the month that clients have to skip the Christ Church pantry, they can be referred to the food and toiletries closet provided by her church, St. Andrew Lutheran, in Charlestown.

Pat Miller, of Homefront Health Care, said United Way was paying for free Certified Nursing Assistant classes, including a literacy test, books and workbooks. After a week of classes and two weeks of clinical experience, students are eligible for a state license. Also, she said, free homemaking classes are offered in Providence and Warwick for students to qualify for a homemaking certificate to work in housekeeping services. For information on those programs, call 596-2519.

Miller also announced the formation of the Washington County Elderly Resource network, which will meet at 8:30 a.m. on Thursday, March 27, at Brightview Commons, a senior living community in South County Commons, off Route 1 in Wakefield.

Tissiere said any agency needing young energy to get work done in the summer could register as a job site for the Washington County Summer Youth Camp.

Joan Pistone, of the Westerly Senior Center, urged all to encourage clients to file income tax returns so that they can receive the recently authorized federal economic-stimulus rebates. Most clients, she said, would be eligible for at least \$300.

Even those who do not make enough to pay income tax are eligible for economic-stimulus money, but they must file a federal return to receive it.

“This is a gift from the government,” Pistone said, assuring participants that the refund wouldn’t count against any other program. “We rarely get gifts from the government.”

Forms are available at the senior center or the library, and volunteers are at the center on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 10 to 2 to help people file, she said.

“Please encourage them not to circular-file” the tax forms, she said, instructing them to write Stimulus Package across the top.

“I listen to these incredible needs,” observed Jane Antos of the Education Exchange. “Somehow these basic needs have to be met before they are interested in learning computer skills or how to use the Internet.” She said registration opens today for GED classes at the Bradford Jonnycake Center of Westerly.

Matthew Roman, of Family Services of Rhode Island, said the Rhode Island Foundation had provided funds to place a mental health counselor at Westerly High School. In the first year of the grant, he said, the service helped 90 families. Now the counselor is also meeting families at elementary schools if they don’t have transportation to the high school.

Judy Walker, the Food Stamp outreach supervisor at URI’s Hunger Center, gave a toll-free hotline to call for help in applying for benefits: (866) 306-0270. She also said counselors are at the WARM Shelter every other Thursday to help people apply.

People who help the poor were urged to take political action.

Craig O’Connor said he was organizing a database for RIteCare Works to get people talking to their legislators. He urged providers to help clients call their state senators and representatives.

Others have organized the Welcome Arnold Anniversary Call-in Day for Thursday, the anniversary of the closing of the Welcome Arnold shelter, in Cranston. Dawn Kentish, of the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless, handed out brochures saying that when the state-owned building was torn down Governor Carcieri pledged to see that all those who had relied on it for shelter would be housed. “Keep your promise to those who are

homeless in our state,” it urges callers to tell the governor, giving the number for his office: 222-2080.

“We think the answer has to be a groundswell of people like you,” said Lisa Katz, policy director of the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College (www.povertyinstitute.org), asking everyone to write letters and call their legislators.

“I really think we are fighting for the soul of our state,” she said. Around the state, regional workshops by One Rhode Island are scheduled to tell what the state budget cuts would do to Head Start, affordable housing, child care assistance, RItCare and Family Independence Program, known as FIP.

A South County workshop will be held from 7 to 8:30 p.m. on Wednesday, March 26, at Christ the King Parish Hall on the URI campus in Kingston, she said.

With the economy in a downturn, “That’s exactly the moment you want these programs in place.”

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