Local Food Pantry Seeing Huge Spike

By Joe Walsh

For a busy food pantry just footsteps away from Beacon Hill, Thanksgiving and the holiday season are bringing new attention to a startling local food insecurity problem.

The food pantry at the West End Branch Library has seen a dramatic spike in the number of residents who rely on its services in recent years, according to pantry operator Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD). Since last year, ABCD has doubled the amount of food that it orders from the Greater Boston Food Bank every month, and demand is especially high before the holidays, organization staff said.

Most of the pantry’s clients are seniors, but the group also serves a growing number of families, said Maria Stella Gulla, director of ABCD’s North End/West End Neighborhood Service Center. As area rents climb, she said, residents increasingly turn to ABCD for groceries, hot meals and help with public assistance programs.

“The cost of living has gone up, but their income is the same,” Gulla said.

These economic trends are not unique to the West End. Family Table, a Waltham food pantry operated by Jewish Family & Children’s Services, has seen inquiries increase steadily over the last decade, according to pantry Director Bernice Behar. Demand spiked during the 2008 recession and never decreased, Behar said. “In all our communities, there’s deep food insecurity.”

Around the holiday season, the food pantry’s needs become even more acute and noticeable, Gulla said. Fortunately, neighbors and local organizations tend to increase their donations at this time of year, sometimes giving turkeys and other seasonal goods, according to Gulla.

Beacon Hill residents have stepped up to meet this challenge, said Patricia Tully, the Beacon Hill Civic Association’s executive director. The Civic Association has encouraged residents to stop by the West End Branch Library to donate food over the last month, she noted.

“I think it’s important to realize that there’s a community in our neighborhood that is food insecure,” Tully said. “Our neighbors are very generous and have responded well to the drives that we’ve had.”

These food donations are important, Gulla said, because they supplement the monthly

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ubiquity of streaming services like Netflix and a growing number of high budget cinematic productions made specifically for the small screens have driven consumers to increasingly eschew the theater in favor of their own couches. As a result, box office receipts have been steadily trending downward.

In response, cinema chains have turned to features, some might say gimmicks, like high end food options, recliners and in-theater wait staff bringing everything from popcorn to General Tso's chicken directly to your seat. The idea, says one movie house executive, is to give people an experience they can't get at home. Seaport's ShowPlace ICON spearheaded this trend in Boston, opening last year with chef-inspired popcorn and deluxe seating options with on-demand food delivery summoned with a touch screen tablet.

Into this mix steps ArcLight, which in addition to its Canal Street location currently operates 10 other theaters in California, Chicago and Washington DC.

In some regards, Boston's newest theater follows the trend of movie houses where the movie is only one of the attractions and where cinema staples are given a luxurious overhaul. Patrons enter through a tapas restaurant and cocktail lounge, with a bar.

**Food Pantry**

Recently installed a small freezer in the pantry, Gulla said, and she plans to add more refrigeration in the future. Gulla also hopes to eventually buy a van, allowing the organization to transport fresh food to seniors and others who are not mobile. As people become reliant, the pantry has worked to cope with the added pressure, she explained.

"The need is there," Gulla said. "It's just a question of funds to maintain."