

'Almost half of our community lives paycheck to paycheck': The shutdown is over, but the 'affordability crisis' persists

- [ASHLEY RODRIGUEZ Keys Citizen](#)

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While the longest government shutdown in U.S. history officially came to a close on Nov. 12, families and individuals across the country (including in Florida and the Keys) are still reeling from the financial strains of the extensive period of uncertainty.

SNAP benefits were among the programs in flux, causing many to scramble for possible solutions to keep food on the table. Local food pantries have seen a spike in foot traffic over the last month.

“People’s paychecks were compromised and people weren’t being paid during the shutdown,” said Director of Community Engagement at Florida Keys Outreach Coalition and AH Monroe Leah Stockton. “And the SNAP benefits were on pause. And I think groceries are just expensive.”

Florida Keys Outreach Coalition: Loaves and Fish Food Pantry Stockton assists FKOC with the Loaves and Fish Food Pantry that is located at the William Neece Center, 2221 Patterson Ave. FKOC Men’s and Women’s Program Director David Crooks is a familiar face who can be seen passing out food to residents who stop by.

They provide one bag of nonperishable food items per person in a household. Many of the items come from churches and businesses that have partnered with them, but individual contributions are also crucial to their supply, according to Stockton.

Stockton said the pantry is open to anyone in the community in need of food.

“Almost half of our community lives paycheck to paycheck, and when you have to make the choice between, ‘Do I go to the grocery store? Do I pay my power bill? Or can I make my rent on time?’ Sometimes something has to give,” Stockton said. “And so this is really a resource to make sure that people can have access to food regardless.”

Stockton said in recent weeks she has seen an increase in people coming in, noting a level of attendance similar to that during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I think it just is indicative of a sort of greater affordability crisis that people are facing,” Stockton said about the increase in demand across food pantries. “We just want to be able to be here and help support people for that.”

Stockton said the pantry is set up with a dual focus on financial stability and as a health initiative for the community. She said recently they partnered with the SOS Foundation and conducted a course with their clients on how to shop smart and utilize other money-saving tips.

Stockton said anyone coming to the Neece Center can also receive additional support through the staff who are willing to provide various resources to help them with other challenges they might be facing.

The food pantry is open every Monday, Tuesday and Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. They accept nonperishable items, and Stockton said they are currently in need of peanut butter and jelly at the pantry, but they accept various other food items. They also accept monetary donations at ahmonroe.org/donate or by mailing a check.

For information, visit ahmonroe.org or call 305-296-6196

SOS FoundationThe SOS Foundation has seen similar increases in demand, but Morgan Tracey-Barber, who serves as executive director at the local nonprofit, said the community effort has been impressive.

Tracey-Barber said they typically assess demand through new sign ups at the food pantry. In the past she said they would average anywhere between 0 to 2 new sign ups, but in the last few weeks have seen an average of 8 to 9 sign ups weekly on top of the recurring clients.

However, Tracey-Barber said she has also seen just as many community members step up and contribute in any way they can.

“I’m really seeing the community help each other,” said Tracey-Barber. “I’m seeing individuals walk in with a bag full of, I think last week there was the BOGOs on peanut butter at Publix. We just got someone who

‘Instacarted’ here. People think that, you know, one or two things don’t help, but it really does add up.”

Tracey-Barber said she typically sees another spike in contributions during the holidays, but she hopes the awareness and support won’t dwindle past the holiday months.

“Everybody want to give around the holidays, which we love that. We’re so appreciative, but we want people to remember that you know people are struggling throughout the year,” Tracey-Barber said.

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The SOS Foundation Food Pantry accepts nonperishable items and dairy items such as milk and eggs, which are often in high demand. The pantry is open Monday through Thursday, with varying hours.

For information visit, sosfoundation.org or call 305-292-3013

Florida Keys SPCA Tammy Fox-Royer, executive director at the Florida Keys SPCA, said they understand among these families that are just managing to keep their heads above water, there are their furry companions that are in need of a helping hand.

That’s why the FKSPCA is reminding residents that their Key West and Marathon locations continue to offer pet food at no cost to residents.

The FKSPCA started their pet pantry back in 2012 as a way to address financial struggles for pet owners, but have continued to offer the free service.

Fox-Royer said during periods of time where the organization has noticed economic struggles city-wide or county-wide they heavily promote the service and encourage people to bring in donations or buy food items directly off of their Amazon wishlists. They have separate wishlists for their Key West and Marathon location.

“So in the past, it’s been a steady stream of individuals that would come in, but definitely since we’ve started promoting it over the last few weeks, we’ve had more people calling and more people coming in to pick up pet food, for sure,” Fox-Royer said.

Fox-Royer also noted the increased donations from the community. She said while they try their best to provide food for families in need, the additional donations are crucial to keeping the pantry running.

Fox-Royer said they make an effort to minimize as many barriers for residents seeking the extra help. She encouraged any individuals who have any transportation challenges to call the offices for assistance. She said they strive to keep pets with their families whenever they experience these challenging periods.

“We don’t want their pets to go hungry,” Fox-Royer said. “So we want to make it as easy as possible.”

Fox-Royer also wants to remind residents that they provide wellness clinics that offer affordable sometimes free care for cats and dogs. They have schedules available on their website.

For information, visit fkspca.org or call 305-294-4857 (Key West) or 305-743-4800 (Marathon). To donate to their Amazon wishlist visit, amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/2JGSK5ILWLKOG (Key West) or amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/37JS73FW4XA0Z (Marathon).

City Commissioner proposes emergency fund for food pantries City officials have also taken notice of the surging demand, with City Commissioner Sam Kaufman proposing the placement of a resolution in the agenda of the upcoming Dec. 2 commission meeting to address the need.

Kaufman shared in an email addressed to city leadership the proposal of a \$40,000 emergency fund to support local food pantry programs. He mentioned Loaves and Fish Food Pantry, Cooking with Love, SOS Foundation and the Bahama Village Little Food Pantry as some places seeing increased demand.

In the email he also suggested the city ask the county to match these funds.

Kaufman underscored that the Loaves and Fish Pantry reported a 30% increase in clients, with many of the families seeking assistance for the first time. He also mentioned the \$5,000 per month rise in costs that the Loaves and Fish Food Pantry reported, which he believed the city could help alleviate.

“Even modest support City support could make a tremendous difference through the holidays and beyond,” Kaufman wrote.

Stockton said this support could ensure the pantry continue to operate at the current level that they offer to clients during an especially difficult time. Tracey-Barber had a similar sentiment, saying they would be able to stock their dry-goods to focus on other food items or services.

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