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SANTA CLARA, SAN MATEO COUNTIES

'Hunger index' shows more people in need of meals

Low-income residents lacking food grows by 4%

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While there are signs the economy is on the upswing, the "meal gap" in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties grew by 4 percent over the past year.

Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties and Santa Clara University released the 2012 Hunger Index, which measures the gap between how many meals are needed for low-income residents in the region to eat three meals a day and how many meals they are able to purchase on their own or acquire through such federal food assistance programs as CalFresh or local organizations like Second Harvest.

The difference between what they need and can afford is the meal gap.

The 2012 Hunger Index shows an estimated 823 meals



Second Harvest Food Bank volunteer Ardys Sandell, left, looks up a clients card number while Community Programs Coordinator Thuy Lee, center, and volunteer Maria Day get a bag of food ready.

JACQUELINE
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STAFF ARCHIVES

were needed for all low-income residents, but they were able to afford enough food for only 422 million meals.

The numbers reflect the most recent data that is available. The counties operate on a fiscal year and have to wait for the numbers from the state.

Food assistance programs provided 197 million, leaving an estimated gap of 204 million meals.

That's 8 million more

meals than 2011 meal gap.

CalFresh, or food stamps, provided 54 percent of the assisted meals, followed by Second Harvest Food Bank, which provided 19 percent, with the rest coming from other sources.

"What we saw this year is that the number of meals required hasn't changed dramatically, but in the aggregate, families are finding it difficult to keep up with food inflation and other factors,"

said S. Andrew Starbird, dean of SCU's Leavey School of Business and co-creator of the Hunger Index.

"Second Harvest and the food assistance community really stepped up their efforts to meet a larger proportion of increased needs."

The number of households earning less than \$50,000 annually stayed stable at around 260,000 families.

However, the California Budget Project sets the average annual income for a family of three to be economically self-sufficient locally at about \$90,000.

"The high cost of living makes it difficult for local families to put food on the table and with the improv-

ing economy, the cost of housing and other essentials is rising," said Kathy Jackson, CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank.

"The number of people we serve jumped 50 percent after the recession started and continues to edge up."