

Amid migrant crisis, Chicago food pantries experience unprecedented demand



Vicenta Buitrago leaves Nourishing Hope-Sheridan Market with her food items on Monday, Feb. 26, 2024. Food pantries in Chicago are struggling to meet demand with the influx of migrants in the city. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)



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Vicenta Buitrago stood in line for three hours at the Sheridan Market food pantry on a recent afternoon. The small waiting room was packed, and guests spilled out the front door onto the sidewalk.

Despite the wait, the Colombian migrant left beaming, pushing a grocery cart piled high with an assortment of produce and other goods. A pot of red tulips from Trader Joe's was perched above her bags.

"Mira, que bonito. Look, how beautiful," Buitrago, 59, said. "It's been so long since I've had flowers."

For many nonprofit food distributors, hourslong lines have become the norm. Food pantries across Chicago are grappling with a wave of unprecedented demand, driven at least in part by the influx of migrants in the city, forcing some to cut back services.

Many pantries have reduced the number of allotted visits per month to stretch supply. Others are rationing food products offered to guests.

“We’re running out of food,” said Pastor Sandra Gillespie, who runs Chosen Bethel Family Ministries Food Pantry in Englewood. “If this rate of increase continues, we’re going to have to change something.”

The network of the Greater Chicago Food Depository, which includes over 800 food distributors across the city, served 186,000 households in December, a 29% increase from the previous year.

While pantries don’t ask guests their status, anecdotally, a significant portion of the new visitors are Latino migrants, several organizations said. Nonprofit food distributors in Denver, another city that has received thousands of migrants, are facing [similar challenges](#).

More than 36,400 migrants have arrived in Chicago since August 2022, when Texas Gov. Greg Abbott began [busing new arrivals](#) from the southern border to sanctuary cities. Over 11,700 are currently staying at 23 city and state-run shelters. Since then, most have been unable to obtain [work permits](#).

In Colombia, Buitrago owned an auto repair shop. Now, she rations what little food she can afford with her 26-year-old son while she awaits a work permit.

“We’re starting over,” Buitrago said. “I don’t even know how to say ‘I’m hungry’ (in English).”

Food insecurity is far from a new phenomenon. But new factors are driving the record demand, from soaring food prices to the end of several pandemic-era relief measures, experts say.

“Food prices have been persistently high, gas prices have been high, and so I think that all of that conspires to result in people skimping when it comes to food,” said Diane Doherty, executive director of the Illinois Hunger Coalition.

The Greater Chicago Food Depository has so far fulfilled all food orders from its partner organizations, according to spokesperson Man-Yee Lee. But it’s no simple feat.

“It’s hard,” Lee said. “We work harder to try and get more food from the federal government. Our fundraising team is working overtime, contacting our supporters.”

In shelters, migrants are [provided with meals](#), but many describe the food as substandard and limited. Others say the distribution process in the crowded facilities is uncoordinated. Shelters already have seen shortages of other essential items, including [diapers](#) and [menstrual products](#).

Meanwhile, thousands of migrants have been [rapidly resettled](#) into homes on the South and West sides. For those without a steady or substantial income, food insecurity looms. It can make nonprofit food distributors a necessity.

“You hear the stories of these people and how much they’ve sacrificed,” said Aber Abueid, pantry director of SANAD Social Services in Chicago Lawn. “People are not coming here for free handouts. They want to work, they want opportunity.”

Cutbacks



Volunteer Madison Bargas shows canned food options to clients Maryuris Zarante and Freddy Palmer at Nourishing Hope-Sheridan Market on Monday, Feb. 26, 2024. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Sheridan Market resembled a bustling grocery store as guests waited to select products. The walls were adorned with colorful signs listing food groups. Eager visitors perused the selection of products offered by volunteers.

Freddy Palmer, 25, sat in the waiting area with his pregnant partner, Maryuris Zarante, 23. The couple has been living in a shelter for three months.

“We didn’t know it would be like this,” Palmer said.

Palmer, who has yet to apply for a work permit, has begun to feel hopeless. Zarante often dreams of returning to her home in Colombia.

“I don’t want to go back. We came here for a reason,” Palmer said. He glanced toward a wall lined with canned food. “Without this place, I don’t know what we’d do.”

Sheridan Market is one of two Nourishing Hope food pantries. The nonprofit has served 21,000 new clients this fiscal year — more than double the amount of new clients two years ago.

Amid the spike in demand, Nourishing Hope has reduced the number of visits allotted per household. Before, guests were allowed to visit once per week, but now, they can only come twice per month.

“Over the last few months, it’s really felt pretty crushing on our team and our resources,” CEO Kellie O’Connell said. “We’re just trying to push as hard as we can, and do what we can where we can.”

Nourishing Hope also has imposed a limit of 200 households per day at Sheridan Market. It ensures equitable distribution, but it also means some people are turned away at the doors, according to O’Connell.

“It’s pretty tough,” O’Connell said. “None of us go into this work to tell people no.” Care For Real, which runs two food pantries in Edgewater and Rogers Park, hasn’t capped the number of guests. Instead, when demand began to increase two years ago, the nonprofit imposed ZIP code restrictions.

Care For Real pantries still saw a combined 4,166 visits in January – up from 2,680 the year before.

“Our team is working so hard,” director of programs Kate Gignac said. “That’s nonstop movement for four hours and nonstop planning. It’s not sustainable with the level of inventory that we have.”

‘They’re very angry’

Meanwhile, some longtime residents are acutely aware of the cutbacks and long lines, creating a lingering resentment toward migrants.

Chosen Bethel Family Ministries Food Pantry, located in Englewood, served about 100 guests per week six months ago. That number has since doubled. The pantry, which

historically has served the Black community, now feeds a group that is 80% Latino, according to Gillespie.

Longtime recipients are feeling crowded out.

“They’re very angry,” she said. “They’ve even voiced to me, ‘We used to get more when it was just us.’”

Visitors used to be able to select four proteins each week. Now, to stretch the supply, volunteers are instructed to only allow guests to pick two. It’s just one way the pantry has scrambled to accommodate demand.

“I understand both sides of the coin,” Gillespie said. “But I also understand, as an African American, and as a voice for my people, they’ve been here doing this. We’re still here.” Amid the long lines, fights have broken out between Black guests and migrants, Gillespie added. She said she’s had to call police to the pantry several times in the past few months.

It’s a grim reality for a faith-based organization.

“It’s very disappointing, and it’s exhausting from a spiritual perspective,” she said. Almost all of the food pantries that spoke with the Tribune described some level of frustration from longtime residents. Still, the presence of migrants is more significant at some nonprofits than others.



Volunteers handle food items at Nourishing Hope-Sheridan Market on Monday, Feb. 26, 2024. Food pantries in Chicago are struggling to meet demand with the influx of migrants in the city. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

New Life Centers, which distributes food at several locations on the West Side, has been forced to turn away 10 to 20 people per day amid an uptick in guests. But many of the new visitors are not Latino migrants, said spokesperson Rosario Domínguez.

“The message of ‘Migrants are taking our resources,’ I want to debunk that,” Domínguez said. “I don’t think that’s the truth.”

The Greater Chicago Food Depository stressed that all food orders from partner organizations continue to be fulfilled, despite the increased demand.

“The work that we’re doing to support the food needs of our newest neighbors does not come at the expense of our longtime neighbors,” spokesperson Lee said.

‘Not really an end in sight’

It’s difficult to resolve such a layered and nuanced issue, tied to decades of systemic inequality, said food pantry organizers. For migrants, any resolution is tied to their ability to obtain work permits.

“Food insecurity is always related to people’s ability to get jobs,” Doherty said. The lengthy application process, however, can seem daunting. It’s unclear how many migrants qualify — permits are only available to those who entered the U.S. legally with humanitarian parole or who were [granted the opportunity to apply for temporary legal status](#) by President Joe Biden.

Additionally, [shelter evictions](#), currently scheduled for March 16, could thrust thousands further into poverty. The evictions would push out migrants who have stayed in the facilities for more than 60 days.

“There’s not really an end in sight,” said Jen Kouba, director of development and communications for Care For Real. “It’s pretty overwhelming and daunting. We’re putting a Band-Aid on a really big issue, and keeping up the best that we can.”



Vicenta Buitrago, a native of Colombia, leaves Nourishing Hope-Sheridan Market with her food items on Monday, Feb. 26, 2024. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

More federal funding for anti-hunger and social service programs could also alleviate the undue burden on food pantries, according to Doherty. Many Chicagoans were left stranded when several new and expanded pandemic-era benefit programs ended. Perhaps most significant were the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [emergency benefits](#), which were last issued in February 2023.

“We have to remain vigilant, to make sure that these programs are funded at the level that they need,” Doherty said.

Due to limited personnel and storage, simply increasing the amount of food at pantries isn’t always feasible. Monetary donations, however, could allow pantries to increase storage space and personnel.

“I’d love to order more food, but I just don’t have room to store the product safely, once I get past a certain quantity,” said Ken Cozzi, executive director of Above and Beyond Free Food Pantry in West Garfield Park. “We’ve never run out, but I really wish we had more.” Outside Sheridan Market, Buitrago rearranged the groceries in her cart. As the sun beat down, she scrolled through her phone, waiting for a friend to pick her up.

“I’ve never been to a place like this,” Buitrago said. “It has made me really happy.”