



A NOTE OF GRATITUDE

Dressed like a turkey, Open Arms of Minnesota employee Lisa Lane offered a thank-you card on Wednesday to a volunteer delivery driver.

SCARCITY ON MENU

Nonprofits struggle with rising costs, shortage of ingredients ahead of holidays

Story by KELLY SMITH • Photos by DAVID JOLIS • Star Tribune staff

For Open Arms of Minnesota, the hunt for 850 turkeys as Thanksgiving approaches has been a frenzied scramble amid a national shortage of the favorite seasonal bird.

Instead of ordering whole frozen turkeys from one supplier for its annual Thanksgiving meal, Open Arms had to scrounge up nearly 7,000 pounds of turkey legs, turkey breasts and some whole turkeys from three suppliers to preserve the annual tradition — spending three times what it usually does.

“This is going to be a much more expensive Thanksgiving,” said Leah Hébert Welles, chief executive of Open Arms, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that provides meals to 1,400 Minnesotans with life-threatening illnesses. “For some of them, this could be their last Thanksgiving. For some of them, this could be the first

time they see their family after having to be isolated for so long due to COVID. So it’s just really critical that we keep our services going.”

Minnesota nonprofits that serve people in need are reeling from the same problems hitting consumers in grocery store aisles: rising food costs and unprecedented supply-chain disruptions that are creating shortages

See **TURKEYS** on B6 ►

of everything from eggs to pie shells, just in time for the holiday season.

With little financial wiggle room to weather price hikes, most nonprofits are trying to secure large quantities for the ever-growing number of people they serve. The state’s 350 food shelves are on pace to end 2021 with 3.7 million visits, just below the

record 3.8 million in 2020, according to Hunger Solutions Minnesota, a statewide hunger-relief advocacy organization.

“Everything in general is more expensive,” Hébert Welles said. “Holidays like this are just as sacred and just as important for people who depend on nonprofits as they are to everybody else. Everybody deserves to have a meal with their family and celebrate their traditions.”

Open Arms is spending 50% more on food and trying to raise \$100,000 this month to cover the extra Thanksgiving expenses. Hébert Welles is also already planning for Thanksgiving 2022, contracting with a local farmer to raise the turkeys needed for next year.

In New Hope, Sophia Lenarz-Coy ordered hundreds of turkeys in January so her food bank would have enough for this Thanksgiving. The executive director of the Food Group, formerly the Emergency Foodshelf Network, Lenarz-Coy said she’s still struggling to find chicken and paying double the price for what she gets. Other items, like vegetable oil, have also nearly doubled in price from last year.

Moreover, the grocery stores and suppliers that usually donate extra produce are giving less food or none at all.

“We’re just really going to need the community support to keep going to make sure folks have the food they need,” Lenarz-Coy said. She added that she’s purchasing more food from Minnesota farmers, especially farmers of color, to support the local market, which is less affected by issues hitting global suppliers.

Second Harvest Heartland, the largest of seven food banks in Minnesota, has seen food prices jump 5% over the last year due to escalating freight rates, lack of workers and shortages of cans and packaging supplies. Meat donations are down and culturally specific staples such as jasmine rice, soy sauce and sardines are in short supply due to import delays.

All this means that Minnesotans who rely on food shelves will likely see less variety, especially those in communities of color who are already disproportionately affected by hunger,

Second Harvest CEO Allison O’Toole said.

“Things are really hard right now. ... We’re still in the thick of it,” she said,

“Everybody deserves to have a meal with their family and celebrate their traditions.”

Leah Hébert Welles, chief executive of Open Arms

adding that food shelves served by Second Harvest have seen visits rise by 28% this year.

It’s not just food nonprofits that have been affected by supply-chain issues.

Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity has scaled back the number of homes it’s building and rehabbing due to a spike in construction costs and lumber shortages. In St. Paul, Books For Africa is dealing with increased shipping costs — up 30 to 50% higher — to ship books overseas, as well as longer shipping times.

Bridging, a Twin Cities furniture bank for people in need, is facing an urgent shortage of mattresses and box springs. New beds are in short supply due to a shortage of foam and steel, so fewer beds are being donated by households, retailers and hotels. The nonprofit’s leaders say it needs more than 175 mattresses, box springs and bed frames each week to meet clients’ needs.

“The supply-chain issues only now caught up to us,” said Diana Dalsin, Bridging’s community relations manager. “We don’t want a time when we’re out. For 52 weeks a year, there’s need.”

The most urgent need now is a Thanksgiving meal. Jonathan Palmer was still on a last-minute search for turkeys last week for the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center’s annual collection of turkeys, dressing, pies and other Thanksgiving-themed groceries in St. Paul.

He spread food distribution over two weeks this year to buy the nonprofit time to scour the Twin Cities for supplies, since the usual sources have turned up dry.

The Food Group, Thomson Reuters

and St. Paul police helped the center find some turkeys, but Palmer still needed more to feed an estimated 500 households.

“The supply chain is a real big issue,” Palmer said. “There is no shortage of need.”

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Stan Hadiwibowo, food services director at Open Arms of Minnesota, placed an 8.5-pound turkey in the oven for two clients and their families who will be receiving Thanksgiving meals early at the nonprofit.