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Blue Hill Food Pantry Has Big Increase in Visits

BY JENNIFER OSBORN

BLUE HILL — “Scary,” “frightening” and “staggering” are words used to describe the need for help seen at the Tree of Life Food Pantry this year.

“We kind of thought it was going to taper off last year a little bit,” said Pantry Manager Rusty Roberts. “We had a huge week last week [the 11th] that was frightening. It was as if there was a panic of some kind. Maybe the first cold spell made them nervous.”

The pantry has served 32 percent more people this year over last year, according to data compiled by Pantry Board member Rick Traub.

During 2011, 8,970 people visited the pantry, collecting food for 23,602 family members.

As of Sept. 30, 2012, there have already been 7,451 visits.

“This increase in demand, coupled with higher food costs and a decrease in available discounted and free food from our principal supplier, Good Shepherd Food Bank, has put a big strain on Tree of Life finances, even though sales at The Turnstyle, where money is raised to purchase

Tree of Life Food Pantry

Visits

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the food, remain strong,” Traub said.

Roberts said 20 percent of Blue Hill’s year-round population (2,600) comes to the pantry, a figure she calls “really, really staggering.”

“Blue Hill has the reputation of being a wealthy, sophisticated place,” Roberts said. But, if the summer people and the “year-round summer people” are eliminated, the need is great.

“I think we would see more, but they’re too proud to come,” Roberts said.

Although Blue Hill represents 22 percent of the peninsula’s population, it accounts for 34 percent of the total food pantry visits, Traub said. This is a cost of \$78,066 a year or \$1,531 a week.

Roberts attributes the increase in need to the economy.

“I think partly because

people got so far behind,” she said. “We’ve told them, just because you got a job doesn’t mean you’re caught up. And stay with us as long as you need.

“We’re still getting new people. There doesn’t seem to be a letup. We’re also getting parents saying, ‘My kids just moved back in with me,’” often with grandkids.

During the past year, there were times when the Pantry Board wasn’t sure if it would have enough money to provide food for everyone who visited, Traub said.

So, this upcoming spring, the Tree of Life will ask each of the eight participating towns to appropriate funds to provide four weeks of food assistance to its residents.

To that end, there will be citizen petitions in Blue Hill and Surry, both of which are requirements for organizations to be placed on the Town Meeting warrant.

Petitions for Blue Hill residents are available at The Turnstyle and at the Congregational Church office. A petition will be available outside the Blue Hill town office on Election Day.