

How a Newport food pantry became a lifeline for one working family



Nearly two in five RI households struggle to afford adequate food, according to a new report from the Rhode Island Community Food Bank.

LOCAL

'It's been a lifesaver': Rising cost of living leads to record demand at RI food banks



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Providence Journal

Published 5:12 a.m. ET Nov. 25, 2024 | Updated 5:12 a.m. ET Nov. 25, 2024

NEWPORT – When the U.S. Navy transferred her husband from Pensacola, Florida to Newport two years ago, Imani Hepburn-Vaughn was shocked to discover how much more it cost to feed their growing family.

"A bag of sweet peppers is maybe \$3 in Pensacola," she said. "Here, it's \$8."

Meanwhile, their house in Florida wasn't selling. Still on the hook for the mortgage, "we were strained to the point where we couldn't buy food," she recalled.

Through her daughter's Head Start program, she learned that she could get free groceries at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center. The mother of four now relies on the center's food pantry for staples, like the red beans that she uses to make traditional dishes from her native Jamaica, and plans meals around the fresh, locally-grown produce that gets distributed every Thursday.

"It's been a lifesaver," she said during a recent visit, as she gently rocked her three-month-old daughter.

Hepburn-Vaughn belongs to the growing number of Rhode island residents who are turning to food banks in order to get by. So far this year, the [Rhode Island Community Food Bank](#) and its 147 member agencies have served an average of 84,400 people per month – a record high.



Imani Hepburn-Vaughn is the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center food pantry client and mom of four. *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*

Nearly two out of five households across the state are having a hard time affording adequate food, according to the food bank's 2024 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island, released Monday. That's a higher number than at any point during the pandemic, and roughly double the rate in 2021.

"The cost of basic household expenses have gone up so much," said Andrew Schiff, CEO of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. "Rent, utilities, childcare, transportation, food ... You hear over and over again that it's not just one thing, it's everything that costs more."

During a recession, the food bank often sees demand spike in certain pockets of the state that are hit especially hard, he added. But this is different: Every corner of Rhode Island is seeing increased need, without exception.

Two salaries, but struggling to 'make a dollar stretch'

Initially, Hepburn-Vaughn grappled with the sense that getting free groceries from a food pantry was "a little bit shameful."

She and her husband "were so used to being independent," she said. "It's like you go from being able to provide, to not, in a split second."

Back in Pensacola, the military's basic housing allowance more than covered their \$1,100 monthly mortgage payment, leaving them with an extra \$200 for groceries and utilities. That allowance is larger in Rhode Island, she said, but it goes entirely to the cost of living on base.

Benefits from the federal nutrition program for women, infants, and children (WIC) – which she uses to supplement their food budget – also don't go as far.



Martin Luther King Community Center, head of the RI Food Bank, and one of the MLK Center's clients talk about the state of hunger in RI. *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*

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"I can make a dollar stretch for eons," she said. "But here, it was not working."

Hepburn-Vaughn and her husband met in New York City, where she moved at 16, while both were enrolled in vocational training through the federal Job Corps program. He serves as an electronic technician in the Navy, and they have four young daughters who range in age from three months to six years old.

Before the youngest came along – an unexpected surprise – Hepburn-Vaughn worked the overnight shift at a group home for troubled girls. The job might have left her with a permanent sleep deficit, but it allowed her to be home during the day, rather than see her whole salary go to child care.

Still, even with two incomes, the family struggled. Along with the unexpected new baby came unexpected new expenses: Hepburn-Vaughn and her husband needed a car that would fit four children, and scrambled to pay off the loan on their old one and buy a van.

If it wasn't for the MLK Center, "I don't know what we would do," Hepburn-Vaughn said. She estimates that they get 90% of their food there, usually supplementing it only with additional protein from the grocery store.

Since her husband's family has a history of diabetes, Hepburn-Vaughn makes a point of cooking healthy meals, and finds creative ways to use the farm-grown produce that the center gives away. For instance, she said, she might juice carrots and then use the scraps to make carrot bread if the kids want something sweet.

Before, "we were averaging around \$1,000 a month on groceries, easily," she said. Now, it's more like \$200.



Volunteers Sandy Gallagher and Paula Silvia handout lunch to visitors from the front porch of the Martin Luther King Community Center. *Kris Craig/The Providence Journal*

'There is no shame in it'

Demand at food pantries surged when COVID-19 relief programs ended in 2022, and has continued to increase along with the cost of living, Schiff said.

"During COVID, there were a couple of months where it really spiked up," agreed Heather Hole Strout, the MLK Center's executive director. "But this is sustained."

The MLK Center's food pantry and other anti-hunger programs distributed the equivalent of nearly 1.2 million meals over the past year, a 37% increase from the year before. In a sense, that's also a measure of success: The nonprofit wants people who are having a hard time putting food on the table to feel comfortable seeking help.

"If it's even a question in someone's mind, they should come," Hole Strout said. It's not easy to get assistance with your electric bill or mortgage payments, she pointed out, but it's easy to get a free bag of groceries from a food bank.

But people who need help often worry about how they'll be perceived. Hepburn-Vaughn knew that the size of her family might provoke a certain reaction – "Why did you have all those kids if you can't feed them?" – and was relieved to find that no one at the MLK Center judged her.

"You are treated with nothing but respect and dignity," she said.

Recently, her husband received word that the Navy plans to transfer him back to Pensacola. The family will move back into the house that they couldn't sell – a blessing in disguise, it turns out, though one that put them in a precarious and deeply stressful position.

Hepburn-Vaughn no longer has qualms about turning to a food pantry for help. Just about anyone could see their financial circumstances unexpectedly change and find themselves struggling to feed their family, she pointed out.

"If you are thinking about going to a food bank, there is no shame in it," she said. "Everyone needs a little helping hand here and there."