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## Fighting hunger

### Nonprofit's pantry runs low as more clients seek help

By Sandy Mazza Staff Writer

WHITTIER - Even during hard times, Maria Acosta never lets her family go hungry.

"We'd at least have a sandwich or something simple if nothing else," the unemployed mother of three said in Spanish.

Her husband makes just above the minimum wage - not enough to put meat and vegetables on the table every night.

To augment her family's food choices, Acosta turns to the Interfaith Food Center in Whittier, a pantry and food distribution facility.

Each year in Los Angeles County, 957,000 residents seek assistance from food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters, including people with jobs and college educations, according to a report released Tuesday.

The Los Angeles Regional Food Bank's report, "Hunger in Los Angeles County 2006," found a diverse group of people experience hunger and "food insecurity," a limited access to nutritionally adequate food.

One-third of people seeking food assistance in Los Angeles County are working-age adults with jobs, according to the report.

Of those seeking help, 34 percent have a college or technical school education, while 36 percent do not have a high school diploma.

"Even though food pantries and soup kitchens are serving more people than ever, these agencies are also reporting the need for more food to meet the growing demand for food assistance," said Food Bank President Michael Flood.

In the past year, 31 percent of pantries and 49 percent of shelters turned clients away because of a lack of food. Twenty percent of pantries sometimes reduce the quantity of food packages or meal portions because of a lack of food, according to the report.

Acosta, 38, of Whittier picked up two plastic bags filled with canned food, pastries and dairy products from Interfaith Food Center on Tuesday, which was National Hunger Awareness Day.

To mark the observance, the Whittier center received a special

donation of produce to add to its cans of string beans, soup and peaches, bags of bread and pastries, and supply of rice, beans, milk and yogurt.

The center feeds about 600 clients each week, and has about 715 registered clients.

Acosta has been picking up bags of food there every week for three years, she said.

"It helps. I'm able to buy more fruit, vegetables and protein," she said, holding her 1-year-

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old daughter. "We have more variety."

Recently, the Interfaith Food Center has had less bread and produce to hand out, after a nearby grocery store stopped donating items, said Director Veronica Hernandez.

"This week, we're low on fruit, so we're giving an extra can of soup," she said. "We're low on financial and food donations now. We're looking for more day-old bread and other food."

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Six half-filled boxes of donations arrived Tuesday morning from Murphy Ranch Elementary School. But the dozens of boxes of rice, cans of soup and other items would not last long against the steady stream of needy people coming through the door.

"I was shocked to see all these families here when I started," said Nancy Diaz, who has been a secretary at Interfaith Food Center for four years.

"I didn't know there were so many families in need here," she added. "We don't turn anyone away, and everyone gets the same amount of food."

City News Service contributed to this story.

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