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**For Immediate Release:**

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# **SUSTAINED UNEMPLOYMENT CAUSING PEOPLE TO SEEK FOOD ASSISTANCE FOR FIRST TIME**

## **SECOND HARVEST SURVEY DETAILS PROBLEMS FACED BY PEOPLE SEEKING HELP AT EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE SITES**

Since "The Great Recession" began in 2007, 76% of those seeking assistance at food pantries and meal centers commonly called "soup kitchens" sought help for the first time. The Second Harvest Food Bank of Lehigh Valley and Northeast Pennsylvania released the results of a survey of 500 people who have sought assistance at a press briefing today. The briefing took place at the warehouse operated by Second Harvest located at 2045 Harvest Way in southwest Allentown.

The randomized survey, conducted from January to April, 2011, offers an in-depth view of those in our society who are "crowding the margins," the phrase Second Harvest used as the title of the report. A sustained period of unemployment means unemployed workers will exhaust their savings, losing the cushion that might have sustained them during a normal period of joblessness. These workers are joining many others whose skills and circumstances have limited their opportunities long before the current economic malaise.

The survey also noted other evidence that a new class of people marginalized by the economy is seeking assistance: the percentage of people seeking assistance who own their home increased from 10% in the last survey conducted by Second Harvest in 2007, to 16%, a 60% increase. Additionally, the percentage owning a vehicle increased a third, to 46%.

As more people find themselves relegated to struggling to pay their bills from month to month, Second Harvest and its network of non-profits that obtain a portion of their food from the regional food bank, is becoming the key source of food for subsistence purposes, not just in emergencies: ten percent of those surveyed have been using the network for more than ten years; 78% report seeking assistance at least monthly; and 35% report that the non-profits are their primary source of food.

Interestingly, only 10% report having difficulty paying their rent or mortgage more than one or two times per year. Apparently, they have prioritized their housing expense, cobbling together the income and various forms of assistance to avoid losing their home. However, the report indicates that they are more likely to have trouble paying for heat, utilities and other common household expenses.

One in five respondents report having a job, but more than half of those work part-time; 78% of those working part-time report preferring a full-time job. Only 7% of the respondents report collecting Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (what some call "welfare"). However, 20% report collecting Social Security, 20% report collecting Supplemental Security Income and 30% collect Social Security Disability checks.

Because health problems can severely restrict the quality of life and impact workers' employability, Second Harvest asked questions about access to health care. It found that 69% of those interviewed have some kind of health



insurance. And, yet, because of the cost, 49% of those with health insurance reported that they did not fill a prescription, 37% skipped a medical test or treatment, 36% had a medical problem but did not see a doctor, and 44% did not see a specialist when needed within the last year. Also, despite having health insurance, 59% report having outstanding debts due to medical expenses. Of those, 69% reported that their debts exceeded \$1,000.

Speakers at the press briefing included Barbara Bigelow, Chair of the Advisory Board of Second Harvest, Elisa Zaehring, Planner, CACLV, Alan Jennings, Executive Director of CACLV, Terry Ryan-Mitlyng, Steering Committee Chair of Christ Church Lowhill Food Pantry, Daina Nanchanatt, Muhlenberg College Student.

Second Harvest Food Bank of Lehigh Valley and Northeast Pennsylvania is a program of the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley and a member of Feeding America. Second Harvest Food Bank annually distributes over 5.5 million pounds of food and grocery products per year to nearly 180 member agencies in Northampton, Lehigh, Carbon, Monroe, Pike, and Wayne counties.

Surveys were conducted at Allentown Ecumenical Food Bank, Bethel Bible Fellowship, Bethlehem Salvation Army, Central Neighborhood Center, Christ Church Lowhill, Holy Bethel Pentecostal, Jewish Family Service, Lehigh County Conference of Churches Soup Kitchen, New Bethany Ministries Soup Kitchen, New Bethany Ministries Pantry, Northampton Area Food Bank, Northern Lehigh Food Bank, Portland Upper Mount Bethel Food Pantry (PUMP), ProJeCt of Easton, Saint Paul's Lutheran Church, and Salem United Methodist Church.

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