

[By Lisa Rathke, Associated Press](#)

A federal government report ranking Vermont the sixth hungriest state in the country may come as a surprise to many, but officials say they have seen signs the problem is growing in Vermont.

In the new report, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said 12 percent of Vermont households struggled to get enough food on the table in 2008, and one in 20 Vermonters was "severely hungry," U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, said Monday at a news conference at the Vermont Foodbank.

"We live in an economy now where the danger of falling off being able to provide for the basic necessity of food is very real," he said.

According to the week-old report, more than one in seven American households — about 49 million people, or 14.6 percent of U.S. households — struggled to get enough food last year, the highest rate since the USDA began tracking hunger in 1995.

The Vermont ranking reflects the increased demand for food that foodbanks contended with last year.

Foodbank CEO John Sayles said the Vermont Foodbank delivered 7.5 million pounds of food in 2008 — 1 million more pounds than the previous year — and expects to deliver 8 million pounds this year.

The need is growing and will likely continue to rise even as the economy improves, he said.

"We've seen a 35 to 40 percent increase in demand over the last year," Sayles said.

A Bellows Falls drop-in center has served 53 percent more meals in the last year while the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf in Burlington, the largest food distribution outlet in the state, had 1,000 more people coming in for help this year, Sayles said.

Marissa Parisi, director of the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger, said she's heard of children taking home part of a school snack in their pocket for later and others who line up for school breakfast on Monday, famished after a weekend at home.

"We really believe that hunger is an injustice that should not exist in this country and should not exist in this state," she said.

Sayles urged Vermonters to spread the word about hunger and to volunteer at food banks and donate food.

The congressman said he has co-sponsored a bill intended to improve coordination among nutrition programs among various agencies and the federal government, set up a White House office on global hunger to coordinate public policy on hunger issues, and resurrect a congressional committee on hunger.

The legislation is pending in the House, and has not been considered yet.

Besides getting food to people in need, another big challenge is ensuring a more nutritional food supply, Welch said.