

U.S. baby formula shortage hits food pantries run by church, other agencies

PHILADELPHIA (CNS) – A nationwide shortage of baby formula is hitting home at a number of food pantries, including those operated by the Catholic Social Services in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, said administrators.

“We are in short supply everywhere, and in some places there is no supply,” said Amy Stoner, director of community-based, housing and homelessness services for the archdiocesan agency.

Patrick Walsh, manager of the agency’s Martha’s Choice Marketplace in Norristown, confirmed both clients and staff have “noticed a shortage” in baby formula, most of which his team sources through the hunger relief agency Philabundance.

Lizanne Hagedorn, director of the archdiocese’s Nutritional Development Services, said her agency has so far been able to sustain deliveries of baby formula to the child care centers it serves, thanks to its most recent collection drive in January, which amassed “about 10,000 pounds.”

At the same time, Hagedorn said although her team “(has) not had any issues getting formula, that is not to say we won’t in the future.”

National out-of-stock rates for baby formula soared to 43% the week of May 9, according to the Virginia-based pricing data firm Datasembly, which has predicted that “shortages will continue to worsen.”

The empty shelves – where gaps first emerged in July 2021 – are due to “inflation, supply chain shortages and product recalls,” Ben Reich, the company’s founder and CEO, told

CatholicPhilly.com, the archdiocesan news website.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters the U.S. Food and Drug Administration was “working around the clock to address any possible shortages.”

Specifically, the agency was helping manufacturers to boost production, prioritize the most needed product lines and streamline the importation process for some infant formula products, Psaki said during the May 9 press briefing.

On May 12, the White House announced a series of measures to address the shortage after President Joe Biden met with retailers and manufacturers. These efforts include trying to cut red tape and speed up production of formula.

The administration said price gouging is part of the shortage problem and it also hopes to make it easier to import formula from abroad – which is the aim of a newly introduced House bill, the Formula Act of 2022.

A key driver of the shortage is a voluntary product recall announced in February by Abbott Nutrition, maker of the Similac, Alimentum and EleCare brands.

The company, a major supplier, flagged powdered infant formulas from its Sturgis, Michigan, plant after complaints of bacterial infections in four infants, two of whom later died. The facility has largely been shuttered pending FDA clearance to resume operations.

In the meantime, clients of Catholic Social Services sites in the Philadelphia Archdiocese are using alternative formula brands approved by the federal Women, Infants and Children supplemental nutrition program.

But “even with alternative brands, there is still a shortage,” said Fredeswinda Rodriguez, administrator of the archdiocesan agency’s Cenacle at the Padre Pio Center in Philadelphia.

And switching formulas isn't without side effects, which is why Beth Wood, administrator of the archdiocesan agency's Northeast Family Service Center in Philadelphia's Mayfair section, is directing her clients "to contact their pediatricians" if they need to find a different brand.

Wood also is counseling clients "not to dilute formula or make their own," she said. "This is very dangerous."

The FDA, along with numerous pediatricians, has warned that homemade infant formulas – recipes for which are widely available online – pose real health risks, from nutritional imbalances to contamination.

As the federal government and manufacturers work to restore stock levels, Walsh said he was exploring ways to expand options for his clients, a majority of whom represent large, young families.

"I'd love to be able to offer moms free, accessible lactation consulting," he said. "The impact saved in money and increased post-natal health outcomes would be huge."

Yet access to formula will remain critical, since "breastfeeding is not always feasible, especially when the baby is being raised by someone other than the mother," or when mothers "have to get back to work and need the convenience" of prepared formula, said Hagedorn.

Donations of baby formula, especially brands for infants with sensitive digestive systems, are more welcome than ever, said administrators at Catholic Social Services.

"We will be contacting the formula companies to see if we can get any samples," said Wood. "However, I know distribution is limited."

In Washington, U.S. Rep. Randy Feenstra, R-Iowa, introduced the Formula Act May 11. He and several co-sponsors hope the

measure, also known as H.R. 7718, will bolster the U.S. infant formula supply and help strengthen its resilience to supply chain disruptions to prevent a future crisis.

The bill would direct the Biden administration's FDA to agree to an international standard for baby formula with the intent to increase importation and boost domestic supply.

The U.S. does not currently import foreign infant formula because the FDA does not have interchangeable standards in place to ensure foreign formula complies with U.S. health code and regulations, according to one of the bill's co-sponsors, U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J.

"This critical legislation will cut bureaucratic red tape exacerbating this dire shortage and reinforce our domestic supply of infant formula to ensure it is able to withstand future shocks," Smith said in a statement.

He and 105 other House members also sent a letter to Biden and FDA Commissioner Robert Califf May 11 urging the administration "to take immediate, meaningful action to resolve the crisis and provide greater transparency on efforts to increase the supply of baby formula."

Christian is a senior content producer for CatholicPhilly.com, the news website of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.