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Help out the less fortunate year-round

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In three and a half years at the Food Bank of Lincoln, I've had the opportunity to visit hundreds of sites that serve hungry people throughout southeast Nebraska.

These shelters, soup kitchens, pantries and community groups make up a co-op of agencies that gets products from the Lincoln Food Bank. In turn, the agencies provide meals or pantry boxes to people in need, as well as distributing household supplies, which are valuable income-extenders; money saved on toothpaste or laundry detergent leaves more for food.

In visiting the Food Bank's member agencies I've learned a lot about who is seeking help these days. These agencies' clients represent a cross-section of our community: people who are homeless, unemployed, the working poor. They're of all ages and come from every background. And there are more and more people asking for help all the time.

It doesn't take much imagination to figure out why people are struggling. Prices for gas, utilities and household goods are rising while many incomes are stagnant at best. Families worry about mortgage foreclosures and struggle to pay the rent.

Most people do not feel a great sense of job security, and many employers do not offer health insurance, sick leave or other critical benefits. People are in debt and lack the skills to manage their budgets intelligently. Most anyone you visit with at soup kitchens or pantries will tell about having to choose between buying food or paying for utilities, rent or medicine. Parents skip meals or short themselves so that their children can eat. Households on very tight budgets end up buying cheap food like Ramen noodles and off-brand macaroni and cheese rather than more expensive, more nutritious items.

This, in turn, contributes to poor health and medical bills for families already living paycheck to paycheck.

As you might expect, some of the people seeking help from Food Bank member agencies are homeless. And, surprisingly, a fair number of the local homeless are kids who float between friends and relatives until they get kicked off someone's couch. Most of these kids do not make their situation known until an insightful teacher figures it out.

Unemployment and underemployment exist for many reasons. Discrimination is shamefully common, and the nation's current climate of xenophobia magnifies the problem. Lincoln is home to a large number of refugees and immigrants who face incredible challenges in language, housing and employment just because of who they are.

Discrimination also affects people for reasons other than ethnicity and religious preference. People who are elderly, obese or just plain homely do not get the same treatment as young, educated, composed people who know how to act and dress. Jobs are hard to come by these days even if you aren't facing discrimination.

Physical or mental disabilities prevent many folks from working. While some people's disabilities are easily spotted, others have less obvious barriers to employment. It can take a few minutes visiting with someone in a food line to realize he or she has a mental impairment. Schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorders and other emotional illnesses affect more people all the time. Health care is not accessible to many Americans, and decent mental health care is just a pipe dream for most of us.

All of this may sound discouraging, but you can help. Get involved: donate or volunteer. The Food Bank of Lincoln is one of a number of local agencies that help those in need. Most of these agencies are nonprofits and would welcome your contribution. It sounds trite, but you will probably get more from your experience than you give.

Meeting people at pantries and soup kitchens has also taught me that one of the most important things we can do is to advocate for people without a voice. If you are attending college, you are fortunate, even if your budget is tight right now. You're gaining knowledge and skills that can lead to fruitful employment, and that puts you ahead of many others in the community.

So help raise awareness about hunger and other social injustices affecting your neighbors. Many people living comfortably do not know how severe the local hunger problem is - or that they may be closer to poverty than they realize. Educate them. Help them learn to empathize and seek solutions rather than passing judgment.

Be respectful of people who are using food stamp cards at the grocery store or standing in line for a pantry box or a hot meal. It's difficult enough for many folks to accept help without feeling their neighbors' disapproval. Standing in a food line is humiliating and tiring; people seldom do it if they have other options.

And, finally, the holiday season is a fun time to get involved in hunger relief or a similar cause, but once the decorations are down and the January doldrums set in, people will need your help more than ever.

Just take note of your neighbors who are struggling; they're all around you. Awareness is a good first step toward making things better.

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