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## Local View: Hunger's a problem that needs all of us on winning team

BY SCOTT YOUNG

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Today marks the fourth annual National Hunger Awareness Day, a grass-roots movement to raise awareness about the solvable problem of hunger in America. Activities to commemorate this day are taking place in Lincoln, and communities all over the United States.

Who's hungry? There is a National Hunger Awareness Day event being held at Memorial Stadium hosted by Nebraska Appleseed. The event is being held at the stadium because on fall Saturdays there are 76,000 fans hungering for an NU victory. On any given day in our state, there are 76,000 children who may hunger for a meal.

Nebraska averages 113,900 residents a month who participate in the Food Stamp Program. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, WIC, serves an average of 39,569 participants a month.

The Food Bank's 88 agency partners are doing their part to win this battle. We can do more. According to the Lincoln Interfaith Council's 2004 Annual Statistical Report, 6,043 families were served by our community's emergency pantry system. The Lincoln Action Program served 65,786 clients with their perishable food distribution program. The Gathering Place served 18,348 meals, and Matt Talbot Kitchen and Outreach served 100,906 meals to Lincoln's homeless and working poor. Lincoln's hunger relief organizations are achieving greatly and efficiently. But human service agencies alone are not enough to end hunger.

In June 2004, a coalition of National Anti-Hunger Organizations issued a "Blueprint to End Hunger." The blueprint challenges six groups to get involved with the achievable solution to this difficult, age-old problem; the federal government, state and local governments, schools and community organizations, Nonprofit groups, Labor and Industry, and Individuals. Basically the blueprint calls on all of us to participate. Ending hunger is a worthy and attainable goal. Entire communities need to enter the fray.

The federal government is one of the big solutions to the big problem of hunger. Current budget struggles have antihunger organizations scrambling. Deep cuts are threatening the Food Stamp program. The Food Bank has a partnership with the Indian Center, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which supplies food boxes to 800-1,000 senior citizens a month. This program may suffer a cut of 20 percent or more in 2006. The least among us should not have to bear the burden of our economic difficulties.

If we are in favor of everyone having enough to eat, we need to remain committed to ending hunger at the federal level, as well as at the grass-roots level. As a group, we cannot tolerate having hungry residents. We need to communicate this message to our leadership.

During the first five months of this year, the Food Bank of Lincoln participated in the largest hunger study ever undertaken. The study was led by America's Second Harvest, the Nation's Food Bank Network and the results will be available Dec. 1. Jennifer Bauman of the Food Bank led this effort with support of our staff, and volunteers from UNL and Southeast Community College. We interviewed 255 people at 13 of our agencies in Lincoln and in our rural service areas.

Jennifer was struck again and again by the resilience of the people who were depending on the Food Bank's agencies for food. She interviewed dozens of people

who were desperately trying to meet the challenges of feeding their families while working extremely hard at jobs that don't pay living wages. She met people who were unable to work because of disabilities. She heard stories of recovering addicts and those who had recently left prison. Jennifer was constantly reminded of the thinness of the ice upon which we all stand in life.

Jonnie Taté Finn of the Lincoln Journal Star accompanied our staff to Hunger Study interviews, and reported on the heroic nature of some of the families she encountered. She wrote of families in which parents would drink plenty of water for a couple of days and skip meals so their children could eat. Our staff interviewed working people who must choose between paying for rent and utilities, or health care costs, and food. Food always loses out.

We need to change the way we think about hungry people. Let's abandon our old, misguided stereotypes. A colleague who is an advocate for low-income people called on an elected official in Washington, D.C., who was fixated on those who were cheating the Food Stamp program. The number of Food Stamp "cheats" is miniscule. We would all be better served if our leaders are focused on the overwhelming majority of Food Stamp users who need assistance for legitimate reasons. We need to extend a helping hand to thousands of Nebraskans who are working hard to find their place at the table. We can end hunger in Nebraska.

We Nebraskans take great pride in filling the stadium on Saturday afternoons in the fall. As a community, let's all hope for a day when we can take even more pride in the fact our state's 76,000 children who were at risk of hunger in 2005, are hungry no more.

*Scott Young is executive director of the Food Bank of Lincoln.*

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