

Times are tough for low-income Nebraskans

BY SCOTT YOUNG

"We've never done anything like this before ... how can we get some food to help us get to the end of the month?" This type of uneasy conversation frequently frames the phone calls we are getting at the Food Bank from hard-working Nebraskans over the last few months. Food Bank staffers talk of a more desperate tone that permeates the spirit of our Neighborhood FOOD Program distribution sites that we operate in partnership with the Center for People in Need. Tears well in the eyes of a tough-minded pantry volunteer who knows the folks he serves need more.

We see Sunday morning intellectuals on the network talk shows debating whether America is in a recession. The economic indicators used by talking heads tell us a great deal about corporate profits and the well-being of the all-important shareholders, but reveal nothing about the workers or the plight of millions of families in the lower economic classes, or those hanging on for dear life to the slippery, lower rungs of the middle-class ladder. For many of the working poor, a recession would be an upgrade.

The Food Bank of Lincoln and its 65 member agencies serve 16 counties in Southeast Nebraska. In the largest study of domestic hunger ever undertaken, Hunger in America 2006, it was estimat-

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ed that we serve 9,200 different people each week. Those numbers have undoubtedly grown because of the 2008 spikes in food and fuel prices.

That study revealed that 31 percent of clients who receive Food Bank food are choosing between rent and food, 36 percent are choosing between paying for utilities and food, and 23 percent are choosing between medical expenses and food. Times are tough for low-income Nebraskans.

September is Hunger Action Month across the country. This month, the Food Bank is firing up its BackPack Program, which sends home food-filled backpacks on Friday afternoons during the school year with 1,500 kids at 29 schools in Lincoln and six rural communities. Some families use the backpacks as "income-extenders" that enable them to use some food dollars for other critically important bills, such as rent and utilities. Other families are desperate for the emergency food the packs provide.

Our soup kitchens are at capacity,

and our emergency pantry partners are in need of more food, more volunteers, and more dollars. Most of Lincoln's shelters and rehab centers have waiting lists. There is much to do.

So what actions can we take as individuals and as a community? Individually, we can get involved. Several faith communities in Lincoln and surrounding communities are engaged in poverty issues. Church members can help their professional staff members get congregations motivated. Members of service groups can urge a collective decision to act on behalf of the hungry.

This past spring, members of Leadership Lincoln Class XXIII approached the Center for People in Need and the Food Bank about helping in the battle against hunger. This group made it possible for us to stage Monday afternoon food distributions during the summer in a particularly low-income trailer park in Lincoln.

I recently visited with two of the regular Leadership Lincoln volunteers who both reported the experience as being positive and extremely rewarding. One of the volunteers talked about how "normal" the people were who were standing in line: "Many of the people that came through the lines were working people, who showed up for the distribution events in their work uniforms." Some of this volunteer's preconceived

notions proved to be off the mark. To borrow and rearrange a line from the old "Pogo" cartoon strip: "We have met the hungry, and they are us."

The second volunteer talked about the food recipients as "gracious and thankful" and spoke of a trust that developed between the volunteers and the folks that needed help. Both volunteers were grateful for the opportunity to have helped out and are hoping for additional volunteer opportunities to support hungry families and individuals. It has been the collective experience of the Food Bank staff, volunteers and agencies that few things are as powerful as handing food to a person who needs it. Often, the "givers" receive far more than the "getters."

From a community standpoint, our budgeting and planning conversations must include the needs of our low-income citizens. Together, we are all better off when all citizens' needs for food, transportation, health care and safety are met. No groups of citizens should have their needs off-handedly dismissed.

Hunger demands action. No one should be hungry in Southeast Nebraska. We have considerable work to do. Act. Join us.

Scott Young is director of the Lincoln Food Bank.