Worcester County Food Bank

Creating a hunger-free community

Stories of Help & Hope
from the Worcester County Hunger-Free Network
Hunger affects an individual, then a family, and ultimately a community.
Hunger can best be seen and understood where it is experienced.
Many of the best approaches to addressing hunger arise from local communities.
~ A Blueprint to End Hunger 2008 ~

It is easy to become numb and overwhelmed by the problem of hunger when we read the statistics in the newspaper and hear the reports on the radio and television news. So we must remember that behind the facts and figures are real people with individual stories of economic and emotional hardship who persevere with hope and hard work.

Stories of Help & Hope is a collection of unique personal experiences that are more important and telling than any number or statistic. These stories are a testament to people willing to speak about difficult situations and to people willing to listen. Although the names and photos have been changed out of respect for individual privacy, the stories are real. Each story belongs to someone we may never know, but all we really need to understand is that they are our neighbors, yours and mine – men and women we pass on the street; seniors we stand next to in the checkout line at the supermarket; boys and girls who sit next to our children and grandchildren in school; and families living next door, around the corner and across town.

The dedicated men and women who volunteer and staff local food pantries, community meal programs, and area shelters know their neighbors and communities very well. These stories reflect the life-giving work they perform every day all year round and we are grateful to them for their commitment. These programs are partner agencies of the Worcester County Food Bank and together we are the Worcester County Hunger-Free Network. As a Network, we welcome each person and support them with help for today as well as hope for a better tomorrow.

May these stories deepen your understanding of the people in our community and the challenges they face. May they inspire you to join us in the work to end hunger. This work is for everyone. It is incredibly personal and powerful.

Jean G. McMurray
Executive Director
Worcester County Food Bank
The Worcester County Hunger-Free Network comes together in a compassionate and collaborative way to end hunger in Worcester County.

One pound of food, one dollar, one volunteer, and one advocate for one person and one family at a time...
Real People: Their Stories.

The 5%

How can I serve all of the people in need in the Winchendon community? What if there is not enough food to feed those who are hungry? How can I make a positive difference in the lives of others? These are just a few of the many questions that troubled me when I decided to assume the Executive Director’s position at the Winchendon Community Action Committee, Inc. (WCAC)…a not-for-profit social service agency that has been serving those less fortunate in the town of Winchendon for nearly forty years. As I gathered up the reins of the WCAC, I was faced with the reality that close to 5% of the Winchendon population depended on the varying types of services that the WCAC provides. The truth of the matter is that our emergency food pantry is one of the largest in the North Central area. Due to the economic downturn that has hit this area especially hard and the stalled recovery, too many individuals and families are in crisis, too many are food insecure. Many remain unemployed, are underemployed or they have just given up entirely because there are simply not enough resources to make ends meet. I only wish that I could share each and every story because these are real people and they matter, but for now, I would like to share the following:

Recently, a local family of six, mom and dad who are both disabled with four children (one with special needs) came into our agency in need of assistance. The family relies on monthly SNAP (food stamps) benefits, but due to a glitch, their monthly benefit was delayed. As a result, they had no food to sustain them and were deeply concerned about how they were going to get by. Our agency was able to assist them with a food basket that included canned goods, frozen meats, dry goods, etc. The majority of the food given to this family came from the Worcester County Food Bank and without this food, this family might have gone hungry. This family was extremely grateful to receive assistance. Mom acknowledged that if not for our agency, if not for the Food Bank, her family and many others would probably starve. She hugged me and my assistant prior to leaving our agency and we all cried. Perhaps, one day, food insecurity will no longer be an issue and there will be enough food to feed all who are hungry. I look forward to that day, but for now, I will continue to do all that I can to feed hungry people, to advocate on their behalf and to shine a glaring light on the true cost of hunger for not only those experiencing it, but for our communities, our nation and our world.
To Just Be Children

A newly single mom arrived at our door early one morning with three young, school-aged children. It was school vacation week and the woman was visibly distraught. With tears in her eyes, she said that she had no food in her house, absolutely nothing to feed her children. The children were looking down at the floor. I asked if they had eaten breakfast. Without looking up, they answered “no”. We quickly found food for them to eat and then bagged up food for the family to take home. After talking with the mom, we readily assessed that the family would qualify for SNAP (food stamps) benefits. We also discussed other resources in the community that might be helpful and were able to provide needed school supplies that the children had been lacking. This mom was part of the working poor. Working as hard as she could, she just couldn’t make ends meet. It pained her to ask for assistance and that pain showed on her face and the faces of her children.

Seeing the vulnerability of this family made me wonder how many children’s lives have been shaped by hunger and desperation and how this must affect their formative years. Looking at the sadness in these children’s eyes, when there should have been the joy of childhood, I wondered what the effect on their developing personalities and their feeling of self-worth would be. And, I marveled at the strength of this mom to get up every day and go to work, to suffer the indignity of seeing her children hungry, finding a way to resolve that hunger, and carrying on in the face of it all.

I am grateful that we were there to help. My wish is that no-one would need this help, that no-one would have to suffer the indignities of poverty and hunger. I mainly wish that children could just be children.
Help When It Matters Most

The Worcester Police came to our agency requesting food for a family of five with three small children. The wife had been sick and when the ambulance and the police had been called to their apartment, one of the children said to the police that they were hungry. When they checked the cupboards, there was no food.

We supplied the family with milk, canned goods and meat from the Worcester County Food Bank to last them for a week. We informed the police that we could assist the family with food and also with help filling out a food stamp application.

The police knew about our food pantry but they were surprised with the additional help and support we were able to offer.

For The Kids

In March, 2011 a family of 5--mom and dad, 2 sons (ages 6 and 4), and 1 daughter (age 2)--moved into the area. Having difficulty finding employment (and thus, a stable residence), they came to the Cleghorn Neighborhood Center (CNC) for help. The CNC was able to secure a place for them at a family shelter. Once they obtained regular employment they were able to move to their own place, but things were still difficult financially. Happily, the CNC was able to continue to help this family--with help dealing with temporary obstacles, adult-ed classes and perhaps most importantly, food assistance.

Though hunger is a problem no matter who is involved, it is particularly difficult when young children are involved--too young to be able to understand what is wrong, they know only that they are hungry; and this is more difficult for the parents to cope with than even their own hunger! Thanks to the tremendous help from the Worcester County Food Bank, local grocery stores and individual donations, the CNC was able to provide this family with a generous supply of food each month until things turned around for them. We were able to provide food--good, healthy food--including fresh produce and meats........and once in a while, we even had a treat or two for the kids.
Beyond Food Assistance

John, an over 75 year old gentleman, visited our food pantry for the first time in the fall of 2011. He had great difficulty with his mobility, and walked with a cane. He was in desperate need of food and did not know where to turn. He heard about our food pantry from a neighbor.

He was ashamed to have to ask for assistance. A staff person assured him there was no need for him to feel shame and she took his application. As is the policy for our food pantry we explore what the individual's needs are beyond the need for food. Once we have determined the individual's needs, we then move on to explore what assistance the individual may be receiving and direct him or her to the appropriate providers who may be able to help meet their remaining needs.

As he explained to us he never expected to be in this position, but with the “continual losses to his retirement fund he had outlived his money”. He was doing everything possible to pay his property taxes so that he could remain in his home, and that left very little money for food or other necessities.

The staff person informed him about the SNAP (food stamps) Program and helped him to complete an application. She also worked with him regarding a reduced property tax liability for older residents, through his town assessor's office (of which he did not know anything about).

We advised him to come to the food pantry as often as he needed to while he waited for approval for his SNAP benefits, even though we serve individuals only one time every four weeks. He kept in contact with the staff person via email informing her of his progress in applying for a property tax reduction, and his SNAP benefit application. After a couple of months his financial crisis improved after receiving both of these benefits and he now visits the food pantry only occasionally. He credits the food pantry with saving him from eating cat food to stay alive, and therefore saving his life.
Tears Of Joy

One day during our food pantry operation as I was coming out of my office, I noticed a woman come in. She said something to the food pantry coordinator, after which her face turned ashen and she walked to the back of the building.

Later, figuring that there was some sort of problem, I asked the pantry coordinator what had transpired. She told me that the woman had brought a bag of groceries to her car and came in to get the rest of her supplies. She then told the Pantry Coordinator that her children were in the car and were so happy with what they had received they were crying tears of joy.

How many of us cry tears of joy when we bring our groceries home?
Perhaps we should.

Nutrition And Safety... A Basic Human Right

In the winter of 2011-2012, we accepted a woman and her three children into our shelter, all of whom had serious and varied food allergies.

Due to very serious safety concerns, this mother was not able to seek any sort of public assistance to help her feed her children properly, for fear that it would have been too easy for their abuser to track them within the system.

Because of these circumstances, the shelter needed to spend the bulk of our monthly food budget on very expensive dietary specific foods for this family. The Worcester County Food Bank, with their wide range of food products, allowed us to provide breakfast, lunch and dinner for the remainder of our residents.

Without the support of Worcester County Food Bank, programs such as ours would have a very hard time meeting the nutritional needs of our participants.
**Bridging The Gap For Seniors**

This story started in the Fall of 2005. We attempted to reach all Seniors in town by mailing an informational letter to all. At that time, an elderly couple came in and registered for food assistance. The man was 96 years of age and a retired firefighter. The woman was 76.

He had been retired for so many years that his partial pension was very little. Due to inflation, his pension has never caught up to today’s financial needs.

We are happy that we can assist them and we were happy to help celebrate his 100th birthday in April 2009!

**Providing A Lifeline**

A family of 7 (1 adult and 6 children) moved to Piedmont Street in Worcester. They had no food, no food stamps and no income at this point. They came to the Mustard Seed for supper one night—this is how we found out about their situation.

They ate supper and took more meals home. We also told them about our food pantry.

The next day, mom came to our food pantry for groceries. She used the food pantry a lot and we also took her grocery shopping. Finally, she was able to obtain food stamps.

Until the food stamps, the meals and food pantry assistance were her lifeline.

Now she or one of her daughters volunteers to help me at the Mustard Seed.
Not Alone

One story that comes to mind is the woman I met and gave an emergency box to. She was having major struggles in her life and her story is one that I will never forget. It made quite an impact on me.

This woman came to the pantry to receive an emergency box a few months ago. She was dealing with an abusive husband (who she had recently escaped from) and was trying to get a divorce while struggling to pay rent, utility bills, and make sure her children were taken care of in a safe environment— all by herself. She had nothing of her own and no family nearby to give her the support she desperately needed. After escaping her dangerous living situation, she could only find a part-time job as she had very little work experience and had been mostly a stay-at-home mom. Struggling to make ends meet, she found herself as she called it, “feeling a bit desperate” having little luck finding somewhere she could go for help.

When she arrived at the pantry she said she had virtually no food in her home and would appreciate anything we could offer her. She sobbed with gratitude when she received an emergency box, then smiling when she saw a box of Fruit Loops cereal saying, “the boys will be so thrilled—this is their favorite!” Her smile and the look of relief on her face having one less thing for her to struggle with was heart-wrenching and quite emotional. It made me so glad that our food pantry was able to provide her family with not just a box of food, but also hope knowing that there are people that really care and she is not alone. I was so impressed with her courage and will never forget that day.

She was an awesome person. I think about her now and then and hope she is doing well.
The Paper Plate Campaign

In September 2011, during the budget negotiations, Hunger Action Month became an incredible platform to leverage the scale of our collective voice in Washington, DC with the Paper Plate Advocacy Project.

In our state and around the country, food banks sent Congress the message that hunger is in every district in America and demands their attention. The Worcester County Food Bank participated in a national advocacy effort inspired by Feeding America to collect plates representing the voices of hungry people. Eight partner agencies of the Worcester County Food Bank produced 520 plates in a 2 week period to share with our 3 Congressional Representatives from Worcester County; James McGovern, Richard Neal and John Olver.

Dear Congressmen,
Without the food pantry, we may not have had enough to eat.

- John Jr.

Dear Congressman,
Without the food pantry, we may not be able to afford my tuition.

- Krysta

Keep me from starvation!

- Julie
Feed The Children Please!!

Worcester, MA

You need food or you will not survive.

Worcester, MA

A Hungry man is an Angry man.

Worcester, MA

Food makes us strong.

Worcester, MA

Food is ESSENTIAL to LIFE & Happiness!

Worcester, MA

Without food, helpless people would die.

Worcester, MA

Please don't cut off food stamps that are crucial to the survival of my family.

Worcester, MA

With food stamps I could survive healthy.

Worcester, MA

We need more food stamps to survive.

Worcester, MA

Lies & Breita 8/03
Journey Toward Self-Sufficiency

A married couple, originally from Kenya, were pregnant with their fifth child who was born in November, 2011. As an African-born woman, she is considered at high risk for having a low-birth weight baby. Therefore, upon discharge, the Medical Center referred her to Pernet’s Healthy Start Program whose objective is to reduce infant mortality in Worcester. Since then she has been visited every three weeks by a Pernet nurse or case worker.

Soon she was introduced to Pernet’s Food Pantry where once a month she can get an emergency supply of formula to supplement her breast feeding and a small package of diapers. Pernet’s formula and diapers program is supported by the United Way of Central Massachusetts. In addition, we provide her family with a supply of groceries from the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, available at the Worcester County Food Bank. The food package includes fresh milk, a valued nutritional commodity for the older children, offered through Rachel’s Table.

The mother has also participated in other Pernet programs such as our Nutrition Workshop, a series of six classes taught by a nutrition educator from UMass Extension Nutrition Education Program. Here in a small group she learned about healthy food choices for herself and her family, with emphasis on adapting to American culture. She was able to bring her newborn with her to class because childcare was provided by Pernet volunteers.

The family also received a Thanksgiving basket and Christmas gifts for their children, through our holiday assistance program that’s coordinated by volunteers and donations of food and gifts from individuals and community groups. The Worcester County Food Bank is a key partner in the Thanksgiving program.

Through a holistic approach and the collaboration of many partners we are able to provide families like this couple with direct service and referrals to both Pernet’s and community programs in their journey toward self-sufficiency. By including supplies of adequate and nutritious food, formula, diapers, and fresh milk, plus access to other important resources, this recent immigrant family has a solid foundation for life in their new home.
One Piece Of The Puzzle

Last year a family moved to our town from down south. They were originally from Massachusetts but moved down south thinking it would be a nice place to live. They bought a house with one of their relatives and were looking forward to raising their 2 children there. Then things began to fall apart. The relative that they bought the house with passed away—leaving it hard to pay the mortgage alone. Then the father lost his job. Then both of their children were diagnosed with autism (one child is high functioning, the other has severe autism). Being very disappointed in the lack of services for children with autism in Florida, they decided to come back to Massachusetts. After losing their house to bankruptcy, they had to sell all of their furniture to afford to come back. With no family support and no money they felt very lost coming here. When the mom called us she was in desperate need of food and community support. Our food pantry was not only able to assist her with food and presents for her children for Christmas, we were able to refer her to the right people in our community that would be able to help. We put the “word” out to our community that this family needed our help. From that community e-mail that went out we were able to get them enough furnishings for their apartment (beds, chairs etc..)

They now also have the school support they need for their children as well as a fabulous school social worker that is helping them through this process. Our food pantry works closely with all agencies and schools in our town, because we realize we are only one piece of the puzzle. Families in need struggle with many different needs and it is important that we have the right referrals and contacts to be able to help them through. Currently the father has been able to find a retail job and the mom is working full-time caring for her children. Things are looking brighter for this family.
Arthur And Me

On a recent Saturday morning, a homeless man named Eric came to us for help. I asked for his address and he explained his car lives in Shrewsbury but he has no home so he figured he was a Shrewsbury resident. I gave him the usual avenue for help and proceeded to gather the appropriate foods. See, Eric did his cooking at a local park and I wanted to make sure he received food he would be able to cook there.

In questioning the size of the family, he said two. Next I asked the age of the other family member, he thought for a bit and said I'm not sure but he weighs 9lbs and his name is Arthur. Arthur, the other member of his family, was indeed a dog whom he loved like a child. After our conversation, Eric went on his way with food, a sandwich to go, a gift card for McDonalds and most importantly to him, food for Arthur.

Support For Three Generations

We have a 3-generation family, including two college students and a high school student, where the grandmother comes to shop. The grandfather was a successful builder until the bottom dropped out of the home building industry. He turned to other jobs but was injured and is now on disability so prospects of working are dim. With a household of seven some food assistance is needed. Circumstances make it hard for the grandmother to look for a job. The Sharing Cupboard is there for them. When they can manage they skip coming a month. We have a number of families in similar circumstances of uneven employment who try not to come unless they need it.
Always There For You

There is the young man who told us that the workers in his shop decided to take fewer hours so that everyone could keep their job. But now he is finding it hard to pay the bills and get groceries too. Someone told him about our food pantry. He seemed grateful for the food assistance he received. We are there for him! We have many others who find it difficult to keep up with bills and groceries and are in need of food assistance.

Providing A Caring Ear

An older man comes to shop regularly. His mate has multiple health issues and is in the hospital frequently. Both are on Social Security. He does his best to take care of her but feels worn down. Not only are we providing food assistance but also a caring and listening ear. The Sharing Cupboard is there for him.

Thank You!

A single gentleman lost his job as a construction supervisor. He contacted me by phone outside of our regular pantry hours requesting food assistance. I met him at the center within an hour after his call. He was very grateful for the food and as he expressed his gratefulness, tears ran down his cheeks. He said he has been living on hot dogs for weeks, but he expressed much excitement for cereal and milk. His parting words were “I will have dinner tonight, Thank you!”

Our thanks to the Worcester County Food Bank on behalf of all the people we serve.
Our Best Bell Ringer

A client came in for food on one occasion; he noted that he was homeless. We tried to locate shelters for him, but he refused to live in a shelter environment. The next day he came in and asked us if he could help out by volunteering, because he wanted to show his gratitude for the food. We had him help with sorting canned goods for our food pantry.

In the meantime, I asked him if he wouldn’t mind us conducting a background check on him, so we could give him a temporary position ringing the bells. His check came back clean and we hired him on a trial basis. He ended up being our best bell ringer. People loved his attitude and we gave him all kinds of hours. This allowed him to get an apartment in Athol and search for a more permanent job. He eventually found a job that would support him through the whole year.

The neat part of this story was that while he was working on the kettle, a homeless teen came up to him. He called us to come pick the teen up to see if we could find a shelter. We were able to get him into a shelter in Fitchburg. So this kind of came full circle with this particular person and it was very rewarding to see that a few bags of food could touch two entirely different lives.

A Special Birthday

After answering the usual questions, the mother of four hesitantly asked if we had meat in our pantry. When I said “yes”, she told me that today was her son’s 10th birthday, and she was hoping they could have meat for dinner that evening.

Armed with this information, I gave her a large chicken and all the trimmings to make it a festive dinner. When I offered the Mom a box of cake mix, she quietly said “no”, because she had no eggs (neither did we), so I gave her the nicest package of cookies I could find and a large can of fruit.

Thanks to the Worcester County Food Bank, we were able to provide a 10-year old and his family with a special birthday celebration and a nutritious meal. Seeing her joy made all the work involved worthwhile.
Time To Heal

As a Coordinator I was substituting for a volunteer one time. We had a male client coming for the first time. Apparently he had a physical and an EKG that showed things were all right. In a follow-up visit his doctor sensed something was wrong and another EKG was administered. His heart was not all right this time. The end result was a bypass operation but as a result he was out of work for three months. He had not been able to sign up for unemployment or any other services so he needed our help for food assistance.

As he talked we learned that he was a single guy in his forties whose work was his life. Now he couldn’t work and he was getting bored and also worried about meeting bills and having food. I joked that I could give him a desk job but the pay was satisfaction not monetary. We chuckled and he left telling us he was certainly glad we were there when he needed something. The volunteers looked at each other and said we were glad to be there at the right time for him.
You’ve Got A Friend

Several weeks ago a woman came to the food pantry in West Brookfield for some food assistance. Our volunteers noted that she was near tears and soon she shared that it was distressing to have to come and seek help. She never thought she would have to ask for food. Our volunteers assured her that our food pantry certainly wanted to help and they explained how to sign up and how the distribution process worked. She began to make her selections. Then she pointed to the friend who had brought her and said her friend needed help also. It became apparent that the friend did indeed have needs as well. The friend was undergoing chemo treatments and was in the stage of having had her hair fall out. She had a child that she was trying to care for – volunteers say she was a single mom. Our volunteers assured this woman that she too could get help and they signed her up.

Both women left expressing their thanks for being able to get some assistance. Our volunteers felt glad they could be of help and said to me they went home feeling such sympathy for the situation but at the same time were also glad they could be a part of providing help for these women.
Thank You

to the following agencies for contributing stories of Help & Hope:

Catholic Charities, Worcester
Cleghorn Neighborhood Center, Fitchburg
Friendly House, Worcester
Gardner Visiting Nursing Association, Inc.
Jeremiah’s Inn, Worcester
Mustard Seed, Worcester
People First Food Pantry, Uxbridge
Pernet Family Health Service, Worcester
Salvation Army, Athol
SDA Community Services, Lancaster
Sharing Cupboard, West Brookfield
St. Anne’s Human Services, Shrewsbury
SVDP St. Anthony’s Pantry, Worcester
Wachusett Food Pantry, Holden
Westborough Food Pantry
Winchendon CAC
YWCA, Worcester
...for a collective impact of:

10 million dollars worth of food
6 million pounds
4.5 million meals
83 thousand different people
33 thousand households

ONE
WORCESTER COUNTY
HUNGER-FREE NETWORK!
Worcester County Food Bank
To Engage, Educate, and Lead Worcester County in
Creating a Hunger-Free Community.

Worcester County Hunger-Free Network

Creating a hunger-free community

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