

Tabitha's Way Local Food Pantry

Entrepreneurship in Feeding the Hungry

There was a believer in Joppa named Tabitha. . . . She was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor. Acts 9: 36 (The Bible, New Living Translation¹)

Wendy Osborne swiveled in her well-used office chair and turned to look at the patron shopping area of Tabitha's Way Local Food Pantry, an independent food bank serving hungry families in Spanish Fork, Utah. Looking past the well-stocked shelves and out the storefront windows, she watched the wind whip falling leaves all along the town's Main Street. Those falling leaves meant that Thanksgiving was just around the corner, and visits to the pantry would pick up over the next few weeks as needy families hoped to celebrate the holidays.

Wendy had much to be thankful for as 2016 headed into the homestretch. Her dedicated work over the last six years had, quite literally, turned an inspired idea into a flourishing reality—Tabitha's Way Local Food Pantry had grown from nothing to serving more than 4,000 families each month. Tabitha's Way had just opened its second location in American Fork, giving the organization coverage of the entire county. Thoughts of the new location brought feelings of gratitude for success, but also trepidation about climbing the hills just ahead. Wendy wondered how her role needed to change as she tried to oversee locations more than twenty miles apart.

Hunger

Defining hunger requires going beyond the transitory, uneasy state we all feel when our bodies desire food and nutrition. Those involved in the fight against hunger define it as food insecurity, or a state where "consistent access to [adequate] food is limited by a lack of money and other resources at times during the year."² Adequate means enough food to enable an active and healthy life. Individuals and households might experience food insecurity rarely or regularly. The more regular a family's challenges with adequate nutrition are, the greater the health and other problems that family faces.

Causes and Consequences

Food insecurity is a natural consequence of low household income, and rates of food insecurity correlate strongly with other measures of poverty. About 17 percent of households below 50 percent of the US poverty line experienced some challenge with hunger, compared to only 1 percent of households earning more than 185 percent of the poverty line.³ The link between hunger and poverty is far from absolute, however, and a focus solely on poor households would lead researchers or service providers to miss a large swath of the food insecure. Income insecurity, in addition to chronically low income, drives food insecurity. Families with seasonal incomes, for example, can experience hunger at predictable times of year; job loss, temporary disability,

relocation (moving), and family break-up (temporary or permanent) all threaten food security. Even positive events, such as the birth of a new child, can upset the delicate balance that provides a family with food security.

As with most societal ills, the costs of food insecurity fall most heavily upon children. The negative effects of hunger on children trace back to a nutritional source—the physiological effects of low and/or poor calorie intake—and a caregiver stress pathway, the social and psychological disruptions that accompany hunger. Nutritionally, hunger often causes families to substitute calorie quantity for quality and, paradoxically, these nutrient-poor, calorie-dense foods increase the risk of childhood obesity, high cholesterol, and vitamin and mineral deficiencies from a lack of fresh fruits and vegetables. Hunger weakens the body, leaving it more vulnerable to both illness and injury. Hunger stresses parents and increases their likelihood of depression and anxiety. Higher stress levels increase the difficulty parents face in productive work and holding jobs. Stress reduces the quantity and quality of parent-child interactions: parents have less time to spend with, and fewer emotional resources to support, their children.⁴

Prevalence in the United States and Utah County

Hunger is as old as humanity. For most of the world's history, chronic poverty left people haunted by the specter of constant hunger and starvation. Famine represented one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and rode with Death, Pestilence (disease), and War. The four constituted major, and constant, plagues for individuals and societies. The industrial revolution brought slow but steady relief from hunger to Western Europe and the United States, with average incomes rising from about \$3 per day in 1800 to \$120 (United States) or \$137 (Norway) today⁵. As incomes rose, calorie consumption went up. With incomes below \$3 per day in many places in the world, the threat of starvation continues to be very real for billions of the world's inhabitants.

Even in the industrialized, high-income United States, hunger continues to be a problem. Eighty-six percent of Americans enjoyed food security in 2014, but 14 percent were food insecure at some point during the year. A little more than one-third of those experienced severe food insecurity in which their normal diet was affected: food intake was reduced and normal eating patterns were disrupted. While these percentages seem low at first glance, they mask a sobering number of Americans struggling with hunger: 17.4 million households (about 45 million people, or the combined total population of the smallest twenty-five US states) experienced food insecurity at some point during 2014, and 6.9 million households (17.5 million people, or the equivalence of the population of the states of Illinois and Louisiana) were severely affected.⁶

Food security varies by region. While the national average for food insecurity was 14.3 percent (about 1 in 7 people) between 2012-2014, North Dakota had the lowest rate of food insecurity (8.4 percent or about 1 in 12 people), while Mississippi had the highest (22 percent or more than 1 in 5). Utah fared better than the national average, with 13.3 percent of households (127,000) experiencing food insecurity, and 4.7 percent of households (44,000) experiencing severe food insecurity.⁷ Because households in Utah are larger than the national average, about 400,000 people lived with food insecurity, and about 138,000 experienced severe food insecurity.

Rates of food insecurity were higher in Utah County, with 14.2 percent of households facing hunger.⁸ With a little more than 148,000 households in the county, about 21,000 of them, or about 76,000 people, experienced food insecurity at some point during the year. The county faced two additional challenges. First, its population grew rapidly from 2011–2015, 11.3 percent, adding almost 60,000 new residents during the period.⁹ Second, services to provide for the hungry could barely keep up with the need. The county's largest religious denomination, the Mormons, operated two full-time pantries that primarily focused on its own members, and three other local churches had part-time pantries. Only one non-profit food bank, Community Action Services, operated in the county. As time went by, Utah County needed more resources to feed a greater number of hungry people.¹⁰