

National Hunger Awareness Day 2007

On June 5, 2007, National Hunger Awareness Day, the Mercer Street Friends Food Bank, New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition, Government and Policy Committee of Mercer County Human Services Advisory Council, Bonner Center for Civic and Community Engagement and Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness sponsored a forum at The College of New Jersey, entitled “The Face of Hunger Will Surprise You”.

The forum focused on both the causes and solutions to hunger in our state and county. County Executive Brian Hughes made an impassioned plea to those present to continue to strive to find solutions for the problem of hunger in Mercer County. “We need to understand what it means to go to bed with a hungry stomach, how hunger affects children’s performance in school and how it compromises parents’ ability to be there for their kids...that’s the reason that we’re having this event here tonight.”

New Jersey is one of the wealthiest states in the nation, as well as a state with a very high cost of living. For those in Mercer County to be considered self-sufficient—defined as the amount of income necessary for a household to meet its most basic needs at an adequate level without public or

private subsidies—a family of four with two adults would have to earn \$49,004 per year or \$11.60 per hour per each adult. One of the consequences of a high cost of living is food insecurity and many of our citizens are being forced to choose between paying their rent or mortgage, utilities, medical care, prescription medications and paying for food.

Some of the important community work to help address hunger was highlighted at the forum as well. Anheil Elementary School’s Food Pantry in Ewing was represented by four youthful members of the “Helping Hands Club”. Each child spoke about the steps they have personally taken to combat hunger in their school. Justin Leese, a fifth grade student commented:

Last year, we brainstormed ways to use an empty classroom to help hungry people in our community. We learned that there are a lot of different reasons why people can’t buy their own food. We came up with the idea of using the room to store food for Anheil families who were down on their luck. Ewing’s mayor, our superintendent of schools, and our principal helped us officially open our Anheil Food Pantry at the ribbon cutting ceremony in October. I’ll be sad to leave Anheil this year, but I will always be

proud that I was part of getting the Helping Hands Food Pantry off the ground.”

The forum also revealed that there are opportunities that exist that have not been utilized to their fullest extent by those suffering from hunger. The federally funded Food Stamp, School Breakfast and Lunch and the Summer Food Service programs provide the first line of defense against hunger and food insecurity, especially for children. Unfortunately as a state, New Jersey’s participation rates for most of these programs are poor.

County Executive Hughes noted that, “We’re hosting this roundtable to publicize our hunger prevention resources and to make sure people know that participation rates in these programs are much lower than they could be. This is one of our biggest struggles as a government; we have a wealth of information, but we can’t share it with enough people. We have to realize that it’s up to us...and up to the broader community...to promise that we’re not going to let this one go. We have a responsibility as people, as members of a community, not only to get participation rates up...but also to look at each other as people, one on one.”

It is the hope of hunger advocates in Mercer County and throughout New Jersey that events like this one will increase awareness of the hunger issue, the fact that hunger does not discriminate by age, sex, ethnicity or geographic location, and that although we have many excellent programs available on the federal, state and local level, there is always more we can all do.



Students with the Helping Hands Club at the Anheil Elementary School speak out about hunger. Pictured left to right are (front row) Justin Leese and Olu Lana, (middle row) Erin Rein and Yetunde Lana, and (rear row) Susan Jones, Coordinator of Agency Services and Advocacy, Mercer Street Friends Food Bank; Donna Steinmetz, Anheil Elementary School Guidance Counselor; and County Executive Brian Hughes.

Dear Partner,

Every 5 years, Congress reauthorizes what is known as the "Farm Bill". What is the Farm Bill and what does it have to do with the Food Bank? The answer is...a whole lot. The Farm Bill is a collection of laws, policies and legislation related to agriculture production, food distribution and hunger. Although the Farm Bill was originally intended to help the plight of small family farmers affected by the Great Depression and dust bowl of the 1930's, it has evolved over the years. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, through the Farm Bill, has added other programs in addition to basic crop support. Programs of particular interest to the Food Bank are included under Title IV, the Nutrition Title of the bill.

The Nutrition Title of the Farm Bill encompasses funding for many nutrition programs including the Food Stamp Program, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (our source for USDA commodities), Senior Farmer's Market Nutrition Program and the Commodity Supplemental Food program. These programs provide a safety net for the hungry.

The Farm Bill is up for reauthorization this year and it is imperative that we build on the progress made in the 2002 bill and, in particular, push for provisions that will make food stamps more accessible to those who are in need of food assistance and improve the adequacy of the benefits provided. Shamefully, New Jersey ranks 48th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in Food Stamp participation and is second to last among the states in the number of eligible working families participating in the program.

Congress also needs to address the issue of the eroding value of food stamp benefits. The average food stamp benefit is only \$1 per person per meal and the minimum benefit is \$10 per month. These amounts are insufficient to provide a nutritionally adequate diet in today's economy and when costs for food are escalating. Research shows that families receiving food stamps consume more nutritious food than low-income families that do not receive benefits. And we know that children do better in school when they do not go hungry. About 80 percent of households receiving food stamps have children.

Maximizing participation in the Food Stamp Program would also generate an additional \$245 million in federal monies for New Jersey. Last year, the program brought \$455.9 million into the state's economy to help farmers, growers and small businesses.

For more information about the Farm Bill or to find out what you can do to advocate for a strong Nutrition Title in the Farm Bill, please contact Susan A. Jones, Agency Services and Advocacy at 609-406-0503 or sjones@mercerstreetfriends.org

Phyllis



Letter Carriers Deliver for the Food Bank

It is late afternoon, Saturday, May 12th, and the volunteers are in a waiting mode, sort of like extras on a movie set, milling around until its time for the cameras to roll. Then someone calls out, "It's here", and all attention is turned to a US Postal Service tractor trailer as it maneuvers into one of the Food Bank's loading bays. The rear doors are opened, revealing its cargo: metal cages, normally used to move the mail, but now housing plastic tubs overflowing with grocery bags left at mailboxes by postal patrons as donations to the annual National Association of Letter Carriers Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive.

Then, as if on cue, everyone suddenly moves into action. Like an assembly line, the equipment is rolled off the truck, pushed into the depths of the warehouse, where others stand ready to lift the plastic tubs out of the cage and stack them one atop another. Once emptied, the equipment is set aside, rolled back into the trailer and sent back to the postal facility to be loaded again.

The lull returns...until the next trailer arrives. By the end of the day, five trailers will be unloaded by letter carriers; union members affiliated with the Mercer County Central Labor Council; and Mercer Street Friends volunteers, staff and family of staff—over 40 people turned out to help.

The Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive, the nation's largest one day food drive, comes at a time when the need for charitable food assistance increases. Poor children are at greater risk for hunger during the summer because school breakfast and lunch programs are not available. Some families can make the adjustment during this time and are able to buy the extra food needed to feed their children. But many cannot absorb the additional household expense and must turn to charitable food assistance. The food collected from Stamp Out Hunger helps meet this increased need and will feed, not only at-risk children, but also adults and seniors, who otherwise might go hungry.

With heartfelt gratitude, we thank our local letter carriers for taking on the extra burden that Saturday to pick up the food donations and send them our way.

Lawrence Neighborhood Service Center



Left to right: Elliot Brame, Randy Harley, and Carolyn Harley

Forty years ago, in a small white frame house set back from Eggerts Crossing Road, the Lawrence Neighborhood Service Center (LNSC) was born. When it began, the agency assisted a handful of families predominantly from the surrounding Eggerts Crossing Community. Today the center proudly impacts the lives of nearly 400 families from all corners of the township through its youth programs and the food pantry.

The youth programs offered by the center reach toddlers to teenagers. LNSC operates a day care program for 30 children and, during the school year, 45 children attend the after school program. The Eggerts Crossing Youth Group provides a safe haven for young people to socialize and have fun and has two offshoots, the Saturday Academy, which offers SAT prep, college visits and career counseling; and C.A.R.E. (Creating Alternatives for Real Employment), which hones job readiness skills in teens without college in their future. There is also S.T.A.R.S. (Students Trying to Achieve Real Success), a "Girls Only" empowerment group. For children in first through eighth grades there is the Sports Academy, emphasizing teamwork and leadership skills through sports and the Youth Cadet Academy run in partnership with the Lawrence Police and Fire departments for children with an interest in public service careers. Lastly, is Camp Versity (a play on the word 'diversity'), a summer camp for 120 young people that combines an academic component with more traditional camp-like activities.

The Lawrence Neighborhood Service Center Food Pantry is another outlet to assist those in need. The pantry distributes food every other Thursday from 12:30 pm until 4:30 pm and is also available to provide food in an emergency situation. Elliot Brame, LNSC program

manager comments, "Not all recipients of the pantry are from Lawrence. We have some from Trenton and many from Ewing. They just must prove Mercer County residency."

As is the trend nationwide, the population served by the pantry has changed dramatically in the past few years. Although there are still unemployed, working poor, single parent and disabled clients, the center has seen a shift toward more senior citizens served, especially widows and widowers. Approximately 75 households are served during each distribution, representing about 250 people. Although the pantry receives most of its food from the Mercer Street Friends Food Bank, they also receive donated food from area churches, individual donors, Farmers Against Hunger and The Village Bakery in Lawrenceville.

The center in general, and especially the food pantry, could not exist without the volunteers that staff it. Those volunteers come from the New Jersey Youth Corps, The Lawrenceville School, and court ordered community service workers, as well as area residents just wanting to lend a hand.

Randy and Carolyn Harley are both full time "volunteers" for the LNSC who are compensated through a job security program with General Motors. Carolyn handles the clerical and front office duties, while Randy wears many hats, usually gravitating to wherever he is needed. He was a childhood resident of the area and remembers well neighbors emerging with food from the agency's original white house.

When asked why he chooses to volunteer at the center, Randy comments, "I thank God for the blessings I've received but if you're not giving, you're not really living."

Carlos Hendricks, Executive Director of the LNSC states, "When I first came to the center, I knew from my experience in state government, there was a need in communities for supplemental food. Never in my wildest dreams did I know that the extent of that need in the suburbs was as huge as I now know. The work conducted by Mercer Street Friends and its community partners, including our center, is by far one of the most important ways to fight the war on hunger."

Recent Grants and Awards

Amboy Foundation:

\$1,000 to support the work of the Food Bank to address hunger.

Bonner Foundation:

\$10,000 to purchase nutritious food for faith-based hunger relief programs.

Princeton Financial Systems A State Street Company:

\$20,000 to support the Food Bank's Healthy Eating Initiatives, nutrition focused programs that increase access to healthy foods such as poultry, fish, fruits, vegetables, whole grains.

New Rule Allows Tax-Free Giving from Your IRA

Through December 31, 2007, IRA owners who are 70 1/2 or older can make a tax-free donation directly to charitable organizations, such as Mercer Street Friends. This option is available in tax year 2006 and 2007. Eligible IRA owners can take advantage of this provision, regardless of whether or not they itemize their deductions.

Under the old rules, you were required to pay income tax on your IRA distributions, even if you donated them to charity. Now you can roll over the amount of your distribution (up to \$100,000) directly to the charity of your choice, tax free. IRA assets left to heirs may be subject to estate and income taxes, so this is a unique opportunity to avoid both taxes. Distributions from employer-sponsored retirement plans, including SIMPLE IRAs and simplified employee pension (SEP) plans, are not eligible.

Some restrictions do apply. For more information on this and other ways to maximize your charitable giving, contact Robert LeFever, Mercer Street Friends Director of Advancement, at 609-396-1506 or consult your tax advisor.



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**MERCER STREET FRIENDS
FOOD BANK**

Phyllis C. Stoolmacher, Director
824 Silvia Street
Ewing, New Jersey 08628
phone: (609) 406-0503
fax: (609) 406-7328
www.mercerstreetfriends.org

Connecting with Our Community to End Hunger



It may be too early for the Guinness World Book of Records; nevertheless, on May 22nd the Food Bank held its first **"Food Sorting Competition"** pitting a team from Princeton Financial Systems-A State Street Company against a team from Goldman Sachs to see which group could sort the most amount of food. The 12-member teams, each sporting respective company insignia T-shirts, stood across from one another, separated only by sorting tables and their competitive spirit. The challenge was to inspect, sort by food category and then box up food collected from the National Association of Letter Carriers. At the end of the competition the count was taken and the results announced. Lo and behold, it was a tie, with each team filling 343 boxes! Winners all around. The real winners, of course, are people in need who will receive the food and be less likely to go hungry.

Volunteers Counts

Thank you to the following groups for helping in the warehouse in the spring.

Number of Volunteers**121**
Number of Hours**480**

GROUPS:

- Bristol-Myers Squibb (Hopewell)
- Goldman Sachs
- Mercer County Central Labor Council
- National Association of Letter Carriers
- Princeton Financial Systems
A State Street Company
- Sandoz
- Woodrow Wilson School of Princeton University

If you would like to volunteer, please call us at (609) 406-0503.