

Hunger Action Month September 2008

By: Susanne Blue, MSW
Executive Director
Matt Talbot Kitchen & Outreach

September is deemed Hunger Action Month. It is also the month we celebrate Labor Day, a creation of the labor movement. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country. While many of us enjoyed a well-deserved day off, the struggling workers I meet at Matt Talbot Kitchen & Outreach are feeling little relief. The last few months have been extraordinarily busy at the Kitchen and Outreach Center. Meals and Outreach Services are up from last year and I know other agencies are experiencing this as well. The economy is challenging us all.

A too common statement related to staff these days is, "I never thought this would happen to me. I have never been to a place like this before or needed this kind of help." Just recently I approached a woman who was looking upset in the dining room. She said she didn't know where to turn. She had never been in a situation such as this. She then burst into tears. As she proceeded to tell her story I learned that she was working two jobs but with gas and utilities and three little kids she just wasn't making it. Her story humbled me that day. I've heard it before, but this time was different. You see, I believe I have become so accustomed to this kind of poverty and despair that perhaps I am becoming a bit desensitized to it. I can be quick to address the problem, but not always thinking of the impact in terms of the individuals. And this is not good. We must never become desensitized to the struggles of others. This is what makes us human.

And more and more it is the working poor, the struggling families with young children standing in line for a meal. What those little ones must be thinking. It just breaks my heart. They don't really understand the struggles their families are going through. And for this I am grateful. The teenagers are a different story. Naturally by their stage in development they are embarrassed and horrified. Someone may see them there. And yes, it happens. Teen volunteers have seen their fellow classmates in the line. It is a lesson in compassion for sure. And this is also something I am grateful for.

The choices that bring people to Matt Talbot are many. Whether it's food for their children so that they can pay a utility bill or keep gas in their vehicles, or help with a prescription medication or rent, or perhaps they come for life skills classes or nutrition counseling. Whatever the reason, many are hard working members of our community. They also contribute to the well-being of our Country and yet have no reason to celebrate Labor Day.

And then there are those who are not able to work. They are the hardest to serve, I think. They are adults disabled through physical, cognitive, mental, and substance issues. Some are prone to violence, and a small few may abuse the services. There are so many issues that our dedicated human services agencies are addressing, but many still have no hope. They are alone in this

world and their hunger is deep. That hunger can be alleviated through the provision of a nutritious meal, but also through a kind word, an offering of dignity, and a willingness to contribute to the cause of hunger relief. By sharing in their challenges we all are fed in one way or another.

In the next few weeks you will be hearing from more anti-hunger advocates who will share startling statistics and the impact this issue is having on all human services and across the state. When you read about these issues, don't forget the people. Our common humanity calls us to action. And don't be discouraged, because together, I am confident that you will aid in the battle against hunger because so many of you already do. By being aware of the issues and sensitive to the challenges people endure, we can strengthen our community and address the well-being and prosperity of all of its members.

Please join in the effort!