

VOICES OF HUNGER

To improve pantries, project gets users to talk

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Rachel Pope is one of thousands across Greater Lafayette who sometimes needs help filling her refrigerator and pantry.

The 69-year-old, widowed Lafayette resident is raising her three great-grandchildren—ages 2, 4 and 6—and they struggle to get by on just her Social Security income.

"It's hard," she said. "But it's worth it."

Pope doesn't regularly visit food pantries, but she sometimes needs to supplement the family groceries. Although she didn't know about the Food Finders Food Bank mobile pantry giveaway Thursday at Market Square, Pope was thrilled when she came across it while driving the children home from school.

Awareness of resources was one of the issues spotlighted in a project discussed Thursday afternoon across the Wabash River, on Purdue University's campus.

A class there during the spring semester studied food insecurity in Tippecanoe County. Graduate students interviewed food pantry users. Some were sent out with cameras to document what hunger looks like.

One of the photographs displayed Thursday showed a single banana in a bowl. Another showed



Food Finder volunteers and recipients work Thursday at a mobile pantry at Market Square shopping center. (BY MICHAEL HEINZ/JOURNAL & COURIER)

a half-empty refrigerator. Participants in the project talked about the struggles that put them in a needy position and what they do to get by.

"It can happen to anybody," said Peter Nuland, holding up his Purdue degree. He has bachelor's and master's degrees, but health

problems cost him numerous jobs and ultimately landed him on disability.

Nuland said food pantry offerings have been "a godsend" for his family, but he sees room for improvement in the system.

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FOOD

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Range of issues

Katy O'Malley Bunder, head of Food Finders, agreed and had a candid conversation with pantry users Thursday at the reception highlighting the Purdue project. The discussion ranged from whether fresh broccoli and cauliflower would be welcome as pantry offerings to why there's so much canned corn and Fritos in stock. They talked about providing meat to small families, too.

Yes, participants said, they would gladly take fresh produce if offered. The recent glut of canned corn is from an extra truck of it offered by the government. And the chips come in abundance from the Frito-Lay plant in Frankfort, Bunder explained.

As for the meat, Kim Canen, a Lafayette resident, said there's a discrepancy in the way such protein is distributed from pantries.

Some places don't offer anything but canned meat to families with fewer than four members. That prompts some users to lie about their household size, Canen said.

Bunder said there should be other options to people seeking meat along with their food allotment, but sometimes workers at individual food pantries implement their own rules.

Bunder said she might be able to address some issues and encouraged users to call Food Finders if they're running into problems.

There were successes to celebrate in local food distribution.

For example, Canen told a story of a woman she met who was thinning out her children's milk with powdered milk and water, to extend the supply. But



Katy O'Malley Bunder, executive director of Food Finders Food Bank, right, talks Thursday about the Voice of Hunger project with Monyette Bryant, left, and Kim and Jeff Canen at the Patty & Rusty Rueff Galleries in Pao Hall at Purdue. Looking on is Danielle Goldberg, volunteer marketing coordinator at Food Finders. (PHOTOS BY JOHN TERHUNE/JOURNAL & COURIER)

Bunder pointed out that milk is more prevalent in local food pantries right now because of a Walmart grant offering extra supplies.

"It's just not easy to get the right food," Bunder said.

Often food donations that come in are random or unhealthy — in the form of cookies, chips or, a recent example, blue cheese-stuffed olives, Bunder said. The Food Finders executive has been trying to encourage financial donations so specific foods can be targeted and dollars can stretch further.

Giving back

The need to stretch food resources further extends beyond individual households to the organizations that try to serve the area's hungry. BNI RPM, a local business networking group, sponsored and helped staff Thursday's mobile food pantry from Food Finders.

"We want to help the community we live in," said Johnny Klemme, vice president of the networking group.

Klemme's company, KL



Mohan Dutta, left, a Purdue University associate dean and professor, organized what he called the Voices of Hunger in Tippecanoe County project. He and Elaine Brovont, executive director of Mid-Land Meals, discuss it Thursday. "To really understand the people who are marginalized, you have to first listen to their stories," he says.

Security Enterprises in West Lafayette, recently raised money for Food Finders through a Facebook drive by pledging to donate a dollar for every person who "liked" the business during a window of time.

Another local business, Beck's Auto Center, held a free oil event that collected Food Finder donations.

That funding helped to make Thursday's event

happen. It brought 10,000 pounds of food — enough to feed 200 households — out to the parking lot of Market Square, which was chosen as a centralized distribution point for many needy families.

Even though gasoline and food prices are on the rise, Food Finders can get seven meals out of each dollar donated. The food is needed by families dealing with joblessness as the

UPCOMING MOBILE PANTRY EVENTS

May 19: At United Way of Clinton County, 51 W. Clinton St. in Frankfort. Begins at 11 a.m.

May 24: Cross Wind United Methodist Church, 616 N. Indiana 25 in Logansport. Begins at 11 a.m.

May 26: Best Western Brandywine Complex, 304 S. Sixth St. in Monticello. Begins at 10 a.m.

June 2: Jasper County Community Services, 967 E. Leopold St. in Rensselaer. Begins at 10 a.m.

June 7: Delphi Armory, 711 Armory Road in Delphi. Begins at 11 a.m.

June 28: Chapel of the Good Shepherd, 610 Meridian St. in West Lafayette. Begins at 11 a.m.

June 30: Best Western Brandywine Complex, 304 S. Sixth St. in Monticello. Begins at 10 a.m.

More information: To donate or get more information from Food Finders, call (765) 471-0062 or visit www.food-finders.org

Other food pantry resources can be found by visiting <http://tinyurl.com/3sm434q>

weak economy continues.

"We can't get the food out fast enough," said Kier Crites, director of agency relations with Food Finders.

Pope said she recognizes the needs of many in the community and doesn't visit food pantries too often because of that.

"There are lots and lots of people that probably need it more than we do," she said.

Ongoing discussions

Abigail Borron is one of the students who helped with the Purdue hunger project. A major goal of the work, which organizers hope will continue as

an ongoing dialogue, is to allow for more bottom-up input in the food distribution process.

As residents discussed the need for more nutritious offerings in area food pantries, the idea of a community garden came up, Borron said. The location of pantries and even the Food Finders headquarters was another concern raised, since many of the places are tough to reach without a car. Gas is difficult to afford right now, too.

Borron interviewed a local man who went around collecting scrap metal to sell so he could buy gas to drive to the food pantries.

"The whole point of this (project) was to allow them to be able to tell their experience and offer ways to enhance their experience," she said.

Mohan Dutta, an associate dean and professor of communication at Purdue, said communication is vital to improve and expand food security across the area. Dutta organized the project, which he titled Voices of Hunger in Tippecanoe County.

"To really understand the people who are marginalized, you have to first listen to their stories," he said.

Monyette Bryant's food insecurity story started in December, when her boyfriend lost his unemployment benefits. She visited her first food pantry that month and has been to numerous others since, carrying a backpack and walking to each one. She doesn't have a vehicle.

Tammi Hawkins said her story "is kind of touch and go." She's had various mental and physical health issues most of her life and is always bracing for the next big medical bill.

"Medicine and doctors can take all your money, even if you have an income," she said.

"I'm really grateful and thankful for all the help I've received."