

Local Motion

The power of Hunger Action Teams

The meeting room was in the back of the Bristol ShopRite store, past the staff lockers, stacked boxes, and remnants of past store promotions. It's a modest room, with functional tables and chairs and fluorescent lighting, yet the 12 people gathered there one April afternoon were tackling the most ambitious of problems. They are members of the Bristol Hunger Action Team, and they were trying to find ways to address hunger in their community.

Hunger Action Teams are the essence of Foodshare's three-part approach to solving hunger: they work on the twin goals of increasing the amount of food available and building self-sufficiency so fewer people need food, and they do that by involving the entire community.

There are currently 13 teams, in Bloomfield, Bristol, East Hartford, East Windsor, Enfield, Farmington Valley, Hartford-Asylum Hill, Hartford Northeast, New Britain, Plainville, Vernon, West Hartford, and Windsor. Each of these teams is made up of people from across the community. They might include businesses, town government, schools, faith groups, nonprofit organizations, police and fire departments, food pantries, community kitchens, and civic groups, as well as individual volunteers and donors. Together, those people bring a range of expertise and insights to the common goal of understanding hunger and finding local solutions to local problems.

In the case of the Bristol meeting in the ShopRite back room, there were people from the local schools and churches, from ShopRite, from the Bristol Housing Authority, and from several nonprofit organizations, including the Salvation Army, End Hunger Connecticut!, and United Way. There were also nutritionists from the University of Connecticut Health Center.

The conversation that day started with the continuation of a topic from the previous meeting. The team has been looking for ways to make it easier for farmers at the Bristol Farmers' Market to accept SNAP benefit cards (SNAP was formerly called Food Stamps). The cards work exactly like debit cards, and farmer's



markets are increasingly being encouraged to accept them, but the decentralized nature of farmers' markets makes the logistics complicated. "There are many variations on this theme," said Jim Palma, one of Foodshare's Community Network Builders, and the facilitator for the meeting. "Having the market manager process the cards is often how it's done, and that can work in some instances, but it's not necessarily farmer friendly. If the farmer goes to five different markets, he would have deal with five different systems. We're looking at an approach that would get around that problem."

The idea the team is considering would get card readers to the individual farmers themselves, which will make it easier for clients to get the fresh, nutritious food they need and for the farmers to get paid. But there are challenges inherent in this plan, and these are what the group was working to solve. Although Farmers would get the card readers for free the first year, they would have to pay fees for each transaction and for the reader in subsequent years, so they might be hesitant to sign up for a reader. And someone would have to manage the system. There were also concerns about how to promote the system among farmers and among people who receive SNAP benefits. But overall, the group felt that this system was the right approach, and they plan to go ahead with it. "We're trying to figure out how quickly we can do the paperwork for this," said Lauren Incognito, of the Bristol Housing Authority. "Ideally we would want to have it set up for this summer, but it's looking like the more realistic goal is going to be having it ready next year."

DINNER WINNERS

For many low-income students, school meals are a nutritional lifeline, providing the best—sometimes the only—meal of the day. But in too many towns, those school meal programs are missing, and Hunger Action Teams have been taking on the task of helping towns develop them. The Enfield Hunger Action Team, for example, helped promote and maintain the Summer Lunch Bunch program. That proved so successful that the team is now working on a school-year dinner program. Once a month, they offer Tonight in Thompsonville, which provides dinner for students and their parents, along with family activities, instructional sessions, and learning opportunities.



That led to a presentation by Josh Clauser, one of the nutritionists from the UConn Health Center. He spoke about the nutrition website that he created for SNAP beneficiaries. The site not only provides information on how to maximize nutrition per dollar, but also offers information on locations that accept SNAP cards, including farmers' markets. The goal is to make sure that the site is publicized to all the people who need it. The whole team was very enthusiastic about this idea, and everyone had an idea about who to contact and how to spread the word.

The second major topic for the meeting was summer meals. This is a federally funded, state-administered program that provides meals to low-income students when school is not in session. For many of these students, the meals they get at school are the best meals of the day, and sometimes the only ones they get. So while

STREET SHEET

In many places, there are services available to help people in need with food and other support services, but the people who need this help don't always know that it exists or where to find it. So the New Britain Hunger Action Team is putting together a Street Sheet that lists where to find food assistance in the city, as well as services that can help people build their self-sufficiency. It will be available in Polish, Spanish and English and will include a companion piece listing more than 20 summer meal sites.

most students look forward to summer vacation, low-income students can sometimes dread the prospect. The summer meals program aims to fill that gap by offering food to students all summer long. It's a vital lifeline, but Connecticut has one of the lowest rates of participation in the nation, and that participation varies from town to town. New Britain, for example, has twice the number of children eligible for summer meals compared to Bristol, yet it provides 25 times the number of summer meals. And in fact, New Britain has been supporting the summer meals program in Bristol.

The Hunger Action Team hopes to expand the number of summer meal sites in Bristol, and identified four locations that meet the federal qualifications for summer meals sites. The team's effort now is directed at publicizing the program. Genevieve Caron from End Hunger Connecticut! talked about how they have done outreach for school meals, and offered the team the flyer they use. Mary-Alice Petrucelli-Timek, the School Readiness Grant Manager for Bristol Public Schools, offered to make copies of the flyers and distribute them to the city's schools.

After an hour, with everyone taking home an armful of to-do lists (and some cookies), the meeting adjourned until the next month.

The Bristol team is typical of other Hunger Action Teams in that it involves a wide range of people who bring a wide range of skills



Bea Maslowski and Jim Palma work as Foodshare Community Network Builders to facilitate conversation within a community, asking the question, "Why are people hungry, and what can we do to help?"

and knowledge to the table. The conversation in Bristol involved a great deal of highly technical, even arcane subject matter, including state and federal regulations, the technology behind card scanners, website functionality, and the ins and outs of PayPal regulations. Yet for every topic that came up, there was someone there who knew the answer or had a contact or could add something important to the conversation. That confluence of talent is, of course, one of the main ideas behind the concept of Hunger Action Teams, but just as important is the common sense, passion, and local knowledge of ordinary community members.

Every team has the same structure, and the same strengths, but that's where the similarity ends. Each one has many different people, a different set of topics they address and solutions they

ROAD TRIP

Sometimes, the best way to address hunger is not a new program, but finding ways to better support existing services. That is the case in Vernon, where the Hunger Action Team was concerned that local food pantries and community kitchens needed stronger connections with donors. The answer, they decided, was to organize a bus tour of local food assistance programs for donors, reporters, and city officials. The first tour happened in March, with support from Foodshare's Partnership Program. The bus tour visited the Hockanum Valley Community Council and the Cornerstone Soup Kitchen, and passengers included the president of the city school system and a reporter from the *Reminder* newspaper, along with a group of high school students who later produced a remarkably effective video about hunger. The tour was so successful for participants that the Hunger Action Team is now setting up a series of future tours.

GROW YOUR OWN

One of the keys to the effectiveness of Hunger Action Teams is that they do not work in isolation. The teams are in some ways incubators for solutions, but it is the town itself that makes the change happen. Windsor is a prime example of this function. The Hunger Action Team there came up with the idea of having a community plot set up specifically for people who are food insecure. The team's chairperson is a social worker for Windsor, and she took the idea to the town government, which agreed to donate two large plots of land for the purpose. Now, anyone who gets help from the Windsor Food and Fuel Bank will also have access to the gardens, and will get training in how to grow their own vegetables. But it doesn't stop there. Townspeople have volunteered to help with planting, weeding, and harvesting, and several town employees have also offered to help in various ways, including collecting used garden tools. This arrangement has a number of benefits: it provides an extra source of food; it gives people the satisfaction and self-respect that comes from supporting yourself and developing a new skill; and it puts those in need on an equal footing with their neighbors, underscoring the fact that hunger can happen to any of us.



find. So where the Bristol team was discussing practical food-supply issues, for example, a recent meeting of the Bloomfield team focused on the economic underpinnings of hunger. Others might work on housing or transportation issues. And that is exactly as it should be. Every community has unique problems and opportunities.

But while each community might have unique elements to their situation, there are aspects of hunger that are common among towns, and one team's solutions (or missteps) could inform the actions of a team in another place. That's why Foodshare is setting up the Hunger Action Teams as a network, where information can be shared.

To help organize new teams, facilitate team meetings, and coordinate activities between teams, Foodshare has hired two Community Network Builders, Jim Palma and Beatrice Maslowski.

Jim and Bea facilitate the team meetings, but they do not own the meetings. These truly are community discussions, and the community members decide what they want to work on and how they want to approach those issues. Most Hunger Action Teams start by looking for ways to increase the amount of food available—the most immediate need—but they all have their eye on the other half of the Foodshare equation: building self-sufficiency so fewer people need food. There has been slower progress in that area, because that is a longer-term challenge, and one that is complex, requiring some innovative thinking and longer-term interventions. But then, innovative thinking is the fundamental strength of the Hunger Action Team concept.

The Hunger Action Team model isn't a magic bullet—the teams meet for an hour once a month, so most of the work has to happen between meetings, and it relies on people fitting that work into their busy lives. But the potential for these teams is considerable. In 2013 alone, Hunger Action Team efforts generated more

than 50,000 summer meals and 63,500 backpack meals. They have also held two public forums on hunger, introduced new meal programs in several towns, set up systems to help people at food pantries apply for SNAP (formerly Food Stamps), created cooking classes to help hungry people get better nutrition, and dozens of other projects and programs. And all of that has happened while the program is still new, with only 13 teams. Once the program has expanded to all 42 towns in our region, the possibilities will really multiply. But to achieve that potential, we need more people involved in them. If your community has an existing Hunger Action Team, consider joining that team. If your community does not yet have a team, contact Foodshare to learn about how you might help form one. For more information on Hunger Action Teams and dozens of other ways you can get involved in solving hunger, go to the Join the Movement page on Foodshare's website, www.foodshare.org.

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

All too often, well-intentioned efforts to address basic needs leave out a crucial component of the solution: the people in need. They are, after all, the experts on the problem, and they often have invaluable insights into possible solutions. The Hartford Northeast Hunger Action Team is addressing that oversight by asking people in their community who need food assistance to tell the team what they should be working on to help people become self-sufficient. The team is planning to send out a survey on this subject to clients in the area and, of course, they developed the survey by asking nine clients to test a pilot version. The feedback from those client testers was incorporated into the final document.