

Today is World Food Day

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Today, October 16, is the 28th World Food Day. Created in 1981 to recognize the founding of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in 1945, it is celebrated throughout the world. More than 450 national private voluntary organizations sponsor events in the U.S. It's a day to study and contemplate the causes and effects of world hunger, and solutions to the problem.

Poverty causes hunger, but there are many root causes of poverty. And yes, there is hunger in the U.S. Hunger is more than just being ready for dinner, and if you've ever been truly hungry, you do know what I mean.

Hunger is defined as being without food or the means to buy it for at least one day. More than 800 million people in the world go hungry each day. 35.5 million of those people live in the United States.

More than one billion people in the world live in extreme poverty. In 2007, 37.3 million Americans – 12.5% - lived below the poverty level of \$21,203 for a family of four. Pennsylvania's poverty rate was 11.6% and Allegheny County's is 11.7%.

The national unemployment rate was 6.1% in September, up from 4.7% just one year ago. That's 9,477,000 people who can't find jobs.

Unemployment and poverty levels will certainly rise due to the current national and world economic situation. That means that hunger will increase, too.

The U.S. government responds to hunger primarily through its food assistance programs. The US Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) operates fourteen government food assistance programs. The Food Stamp Program is the oldest and most widely used. In July 2008 29,053,054 people received food stamps. That's the highest level ever, not counting November 2005 after the devastating hurricane season. In Pennsylvania, 1,205,289 people received food stamps in July.

Food stamps are supposed to supplement a family's income to help them to obtain a nutritionally adequate diet, not to provide all of their food. The average food stamp benefit is 57 cents per person per meal, or \$205 per month for a family of four. The maximum benefit is \$542 for a four-person family.

The FNS no longer issues paper food stamps. The entire program works on an electronic benefits transfer system, similar to a debit card. Since "food stamps" are obsolete, the FNS changed the name of the program to SNAP – the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – on October 1, 2008. So don't be confused when you hear about SNAP. It's the same Food Stamp Program, with a different name.

Other government food programs include school meals (breakfast and lunch) and the WIC program. Home delivered meals and congregate meals serve senior citizens. Commodities programs provide food to schools, senior centers, and private programs like food pantries and soup kitchens.

Private programs – food pantries, soup kitchens, and the like – operate through nonprofit organizations under their own rules. There are hundreds of them in the greater Pittsburgh area, and they have served families in **every community in Allegheny County**. Yes, even yours. The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, founded in 1982, does not serve individuals. It distributes food to the pantries, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, etc.

Government programs are indispensable. They serve millions of people who would otherwise go hungry. But government programs can't handle the whole problem. They move slowly and are inflexible. Private programs can adapt more quickly to meet changing social and economic conditions but they simply don't have the resources to serve everyone. That's why we need both of them.

When people are hungry, they need food now. But cooking meals and filling grocery bags will never end hunger. We need to move upstream to advocate for government policies and programs that address the root causes of hunger and poverty. The best food program is a job. But until the economy improves, we need fair and realistic government food programs.

Just Harvest is a local membership organization which promotes economic justice and works to influence public policy and to educate, empower, and mobilize the citizens of our community toward the elimination of hunger and poverty. Founded as a program of Hunger Action Coalition in 1975, it separated and incorporated as an independent agency in 1986.

You can help. Learn more about hunger and poverty, programs and policies. Support the organizations working on solutions. Donate money. Volunteer your time. Educate others. Above all, tell your legislators that we need public policies that reflect real people's real needs.

For more information go to:

Local – Just Harvest: www.justharvest.org

Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank: www.pittsburghfoodbank.org

State – PA Hunger Action Center: www.pahunger.org

National – Food Research and Action Center: www.frac.org

Government – U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service: www.usda.gov/fns

World Food Day USA: worldfooddayusa.org

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