

Strengthening Lutheran responses to hunger and homelessness

In the past 4 years, faith-based efforts to alleviate hunger, poverty, and homelessness have been challenged as the economic downturn increased the number of people in need, stretched available resources, and reduced many sources of support for programs that serve them. This project aims to help by offering resources, activities, workshops, and mentoring to support program volunteers and strengthen congregation involvement.

Around the country, volunteers with church-based food banks, community meals, and homeless programs report substantial increases in numbers of people being served in recent years. Many such programs are being pushed to their limits. For example, the twice-a-week community lunch at Central Lutheran where our office is located was designed for 100 to 150 guests per meal. In 2009 it served 170 to 240 per meal. Half the meals in the past six months have topped 250 guests. Food Lifeline figures confirm that such increases are widespread, reporting, for example, a one-year 27% increase in food bank visits statewide.

The staff and volunteer leadership of many such programs are struggling to handle the increased volume and other challenges. Few have the energy to offer additional support or training beyond practical food service tasks. Yet the influx of new, often less experienced volunteers increases the need for training and support. Moreover, guests often come with needs and problems that can be challenging or unsettling for program volunteers.

This project offers LPF experience and expertise to assist food program volunteers in a variety of areas and to tap the experience of seasoned volunteers and leaders to help. The particular topics addressed by this project build on a list of specific needs identified over 11 months of conversations with over two dozen volunteers and staff of programs in six states. The abbreviated list below is being used, in turn, to help project participants efficiently explore and select what might be offered through this project.

Program offerings

(draft list to assist in identifying conversation, workshop, and mentoring content)

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| a. Broadening insight of and ability to relate to the unique needs of today's food program guests | f. Helping volunteers better support one another and deal with the stresses of serving people in need |
| b. Strengthening self confidence in communicating openly and helpfully with guests and volunteers | g. Developing skills to avert or address conflict among guests -- and volunteers |
| c. Deepening the spiritual and biblical grounding for serving those in need | h. Supporting volunteers to share their experience, insight, and commitment in their home congregations |
| d. Building leadership skills of core volunteers, e.g. to foster a climate of encouragement and companionship, not charity | i. Clarifying resources and advocacy options to address root causes of hunger and poverty |
| e. Expanding the number of program volunteers and helping them take on leadership functions | j. Expanding understanding of community resources and how to share information about those resources responsibly with guests |

In summary, this project seeks to help Lutherans to more effectively address a basic need of low income, jobless, and working poor people in our communities. The Bible often uses alleviating hunger and poverty to illustrate true discipleship. This effort aims to offer support, skill training, and leadership help to respond more effectively to this calling. Participants are involved in every aspect of this project, from planning services and co-leading sessions, to supporting one another and sharing experience with others in their group or congregation.

This effort builds on LPF's solid experience in hunger issues, organizing effective workshops, and supporting leaders. Project trainers include a founding member of Bread for the World, a former director of the nation's largest community leadership training center, and the developers of hunger resources used by more than a million people. Project leaders bring over 45 years volunteer experience in hunger and homeless programs and a desire to keep learning from others. LPF was awarded matching grants from Wheat Ridge Ministries and Phinney Lutheran Church to support this effort. For more info, contact: Glen Gersmehl, project director, Lutheran Peace Fellowship, 206.349.2501, ggersmehl@hotmail.com