

KATHLEEN MCELROY: Hunger doesn't take a vacatoin

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Which would you choose?

Black beans, chickpeas or kidney beans – from one shelf at The Storehouse food pantry, run by Stillwater First United Methodist Church, you can select a can of beans. On another shelf, choose from canned chili, spaghetti and meatballs, beef stew. Frozen beef and poultry are courtesy of Walmart's Perkins store, which donates meat and bread when their optimum freshness dates expire.

Thousands of Stillwater households battle food insecurity, when a lack of resources, notably money, causes inconsistent access to food. Hunger is a threat. The nonprofit organization Feeding America reports that Payne County has a 20 percent rate of food insecurity, higher than Oklahoma or Tulsa counties, each about 17 percent. Food stamps only buy so much, and many struggling people don't qualify. According to the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, most of its clients are the working poor.

If money's tight, you might spend the first Thursday morning of each month in the foyer of Stillwater Church of Christ, one of about a dozen area organizations operating food banks distributing free groceries to people who declare themselves in need. On a recent morning, the chairs were almost filled by 9:30 a.m., an hour before food would be distributed. There's a variety of ages and skin tones.

Register and bring ID to receive a bag of groceries – including peanut butter, spaghetti sauce, mac and cheese, cookies – with overall content determined by the number in your household. In addition, James Flesher, who runs the Church of Christ pantry, enthusiastically told clients about some options. Choose one of the following: sunblock, shampoo, mouthwash, dishwasher liquid, bug spray, barbecue sauce, candy, diapers or a seven-pound can of vegetarian beans. Also choose between pancake mix or dehydrated mashed potatoes; dried spaghetti or macaroni, Shredded Wheat or generic Rice Krispies; dried cherries or dried cranberries. Everyone got fresh nectarines and frozen meat and vegetables. No registration needed for jars of baby food in a large box.

Church of Christ packed about 200 bags of groceries and distributed all of them by noon, closing time. No one left empty-handed.

Stillwater Cares is helping First United Methodist, Church of Christ, Mehan Union Church, Lost Creek United Methodist and Salvation Army develop a plan to combine their efforts and create a local food resource center. Currently, organizations distribute food differently and have different accounting methods.

“You gotta go here, you gotta go there,” said Kyle Anderson, the associate pastor at First United

Methodist who oversees its food pantry. “What would it look like if there is one place for food?”

The Storehouse, at First United Methodist's south campus, is open Thursday afternoons. Clients are limited to one monthly visit. A few in line there had visited Church of Christ earlier that day. This, by no means, is double dipping. The pantries encourage it.

“We provide a week's worth of food,” Anderson explained. “If you're a family of a bunch – grandparents, grandchildren, cousins – that's not going to get very far.”

At both churches was a woman in her 40s who used a crutch. She said she hadn't received government money since her youngest child moved out.

“In the meantime, we're hungry,” she said, managing a gentle smile.

“Like yesterday, I didn't eat anything until 8 o'clock at night. I had some soup. ... Waited until it was late so I wouldn't try to sleep hungry.”

For many, a trip to a food bank follows an unexpected turn of bad events.

“In 2014, we held pantries 12 times,” Anderson said. “Our clients averaged 1.5 visits. That means that 60 percent comes in three times or less. So we're talking emergency food.”

“We hear from people who are in-between jobs, or 'My parents just moved in,' 'I just got custody of my brother's kids,' ” he continued. “Something tragic could happen, and they call up, 'My goodness, can I come and get food?' ”

Deanna Hardy, a Church of Christ volunteer, told a similar story: “One woman told me that her grandson called and said that there was no food in the house. He's 5 years old!”

Through July 31, Stillwater Public Schools provides free breakfasts and lunches at Will Rogers Elementary for children 1 through 18. Krista Neal, Stillwater's nutrition director, stressed that children don't have to be enrolled in the district to eat.

“They can be home-schooled,” she said. “They can be staying with Grandma for the summer.”

They don't have to register and don't need to be accompanied by an adult, who can eat breakfast for \$2 and lunch for \$3.50 if meals are available. Neal said the meals are open to all youngsters, not just those in struggling families – she planned to let her children eat there occasionally.

She added that school meal programs were “never intentioned” to provide complete nutritional needs for children: “But we can help fill in some of those gaps. This way, we know they're getting at least two meals.” Especially in the summer.

Food banks stave off more than hunger. Food stamps don't cover cleaning or personal products. Church of Christ distributed two rolls of toilet paper per family. At The Storehouse, Anderson remembered one woman who exclaimed: “Oh thank goodness, you have toilet paper.” She told him,

“I have four sheets left.”

“When we're down to two rolls, we think we're out of toilet paper,” Anderson said about the fortunate. “But she was counting the number of sheets.”

So which would you choose?

On one low shelf at The Storehouse pantry, please select just one of the following: deodorant, toothpaste, toothbrush, bar of soap, shampoo.

“I was with a mom who had picked up some shampoo,” recalled Linda Blum, a Storehouse volunteer. “Her 14-year-old pointed at tampons, and said, 'Mom, I need those. ... I've been using socks.' ”

The mother said she didn't know what to do. Blum took action: “I went out back and got five boxes of tampons and said, 'You take this.' ”

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