

Local View: Lincoln is in a Fight We Can Win

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At the Food Bank of Lincoln, and across the Feeding America network of 203 food banks, September is Hunger Action Month. This is a time when we ask friends of the Food Bank and supporters of the charitable hunger system to take action in the battle against hunger, not only in September, but on a year-round basis.

Who needs our support? In January, hundreds of community stakeholders were presented with Lincoln's Vital Signs. This research was a collaborative effort of community funding entities that produced an in-depth look at what we are good at in Lincoln and where we see some unhealthy community trends. The Vital Signs report contained these three major themes.

- * Lincoln does many things exceptionally well, and these successes should be nurtured.
- * A growing proportion of Lincoln's population faces real need.
- * Lincoln's children fare poorly on many measures.

And there were these alarming statistics in the Vital Signs research.

- * The number of people in Lincoln below the poverty threshold increased 48 percent since 2005, and the city now has a higher rate of poverty than the nation or Nebraska.
- * The percentage of children in poverty has doubled since 2008 and is now equivalent to national rates. This translates to 12,500 children in Lincoln living in poverty.
- * In the 2013 single-day count, one-third of homeless individuals were children 19 or younger.
- * 44 percent of Lincoln Public Schools students participate in the free or reduced price lunch program.
- * Approximately one-third of elementary and middle school students are overweight or obese and are not proficient in cardiovascular fitness.

These numbers call us to take action. How to help?

- * Volunteering. The Food Bank of Lincoln's 50 charity partners, dozens of faith-based partners and our 90 school partners need you. Consider getting involved. We need smart, talented, open-hearted people who are willing to give of themselves.

* Provide food. For the first time in as long as anyone can remember, the Food Bank will not distribute as many pounds of food this year as we did in the previous year. Our hope is that our food stamp outreach efforts will ensure we connect people to as many meals in 2014 as we did in 2013. Food resources are in decline. The demand for meals is not.

* Donate dollars. Human services agencies need your financial support. Vital Signs reveals that need is growing.

* Be a voice for those we serve. Under-resourced people need those of us who desire a strong community to be voices of compassion and understanding. As new federal and state budgets are crafted, we are all faced with difficult decisions. Balancing budgets on the backs of our most vulnerable neighbors is unacceptable. Federal and state safety nets need to be maintained. We need to support federal nutrition programs and learn the facts about minimum wage legislation. It's smart. It's right.

Let's be secure in the knowledge that we are all better off when we are all better off. It is the mark of a mature community, a smart community. Our elected officials need us to stand up for folks who may not have the power to stand for themselves.

Thousands of Southeast Nebraskans need you. Your community needs you. The Food Bank and our charity system partners need you. We invite you to act this month and every month in the fight against hunger. It's a fight this community can win.

Scott Young is executive director of the Food Bank of Lincoln.