VOICES 2016
Stories about hunger and its root causes from the Oregon Food Bank Network
You have to draw that line between need and want. You may want certain things but it’s all about what you really need.

—Cassie

I’ve had a lot of hardships, struggles. I make it through, one way or another. God willing.

—David

I do favors when I can for people. I don’t expect anything back—it’s just what you do.

—Junior
INTRODUCTION

The face of hunger is changing

More and more, people who are doing the things that once kept them on the path of safety and success are still unable to provide enough nutritious food for themselves and their families. These are people who have college degrees, are working full-time jobs, and are keeping a tight eye on the family budget. The Great Recession may have passed, but millions of Americans still struggle with its impact every day. For them, there has been no recovery.

As businesses slash wages, reduce hours, and eliminate benefits, more people have to spend what little resources they have to cover increasing expenses. The cost of child care, the challenge of transportation (especially in our rural communities), skyrocketing tuition, and even routine medical costs have massive impacts on people’s ability to get the food they need to live healthy, productive lives.

This group of people, the new hungry, now join those who have had the misfortune of a life-changing crisis in the line to receive food assistance—a line that was already much too long. And while we see the generosity of communities, people coming together to try to meet the challenge, rising to answer the call, it is not enough. We need systemic, broad-spectrum change, and we need it now...because no one should be hungry.

More than half of the households served by the Oregon Food Bank Network are families with children. This child’s grandmother, Wanda, tells her story on page 15.
Oregon Food Bank’s annual Voices project brings attention to stories and insights from some of the people we serve. Each year, we travel across the state to talk with Oregonians facing food insecurity about issues that matter to them.

In 2015, we held focus groups with 97 people who shared their thoughts and experiences with food insecurity. We worked with the Oregon Food Bank Network’s partner agencies around the state to recruit participants from their clients in their communities. This year, we traveled to Philomath, Salem, Reedsport, Drain, Burns, Crane, Newport, Tigard, Springfield, Keno, Medford, Oregon City, Jordan Valley and Portland, including conversations with students from Portland State University, Oregon’s largest public educational institution.

The stories we heard will help guide our work at Oregon Food Bank and allow us to more effectively and efficiently address the issue of hunger in our state. We discussed household budgets, food and nutrition, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), challenges facing specific communities, minimum wage and services provided by the Oregon Food Bank Network.
It was an unfortunate confluence of events for us. It started with the housing market tanking, and I was a realtor. My husband got laid off. He went back to school and that’s when I got cancer. He had to drop out to be my caregiver. So, all of that together caused us to lose our house and we ended up homeless for a while. My cancer is now in full remission, so we’re basically rebuilding and trying to get back to feeling like we’re living a normal life.

I have a garden that I share with my mom. I glean and harvest in the summer, and then I freeze and can what I’ve picked. I’m also learning more about wild edibles—there’s some wonderful weeds that are delicious in salads. My grandkids love coming to our house to eat because we make real food.

I love that I can actually go and pick out what I need at the food pantry. There is something about picking foods I know we will use that feels like they’re treating me as a person.

I think if I was going to say anything to the legislators, I would say SNAP and the food bank have taken some worry off the table and enabled us to focus on other things. We don’t have to worry about whether we are going to starve. We can focus on how we are going to rebuild our lives and rebuild our careers—get back on our feet. That’s been very powerful for us.
I have lived in Salem since 2011 with my fiancé James and our two boys. My dream is having a good, sustainable full-time job I can actually be happy with. Honestly, just to make ends meet. I am not asking to be wealthy, just live comfortably and not have to stress every week. What am I going to do for food? Or what am I going to do for diapers? I think that’s everybody’s dream, especially in this economy.

I lost my retail job last year and we ended up homeless when I was five months pregnant, sleeping in a tent in Wallace Park. The first night I was just praying I didn’t freeze to death. I was so cold the next morning I couldn’t feel my toes. We didn’t have bus fare, so I had to walk out of the woods to get to the hospital one time. It was a good mile and a half back; it took me almost two hours.

We had our son in Safe Families for Children. We had to stay in the tent—we didn’t have anything else, but weren’t going to put him through it. So, we put him in Safe Families for Children for a month. He was in Stayton, so I didn’t get to see him, but you’re damn right I talked to him every night on the phone. I made sure I had my phone charged and I called him. At least I’d get to say, “Hi, I love you. Mommy misses you.”
I came here as a refugee from Libya. It wasn’t safe there, but it has been very hard here. For the first eight months I wasn’t allowed to work; those are the rules. I had to use my money very wisely to make it.

Of course, this is why I am studying, to get a degree and to find a job for the future. Many students work hard to pay for their tuition and they have to find another job just to feed themselves. I don’t know how people expect the country to go on this way.

I found out the American Dream is not that much of a dream. The only people that still see it like that are the rich. I don’t think a person who works full-time just to get by would say that. The minimum wage is not helping. It is basically spending everything you have to live and you end up with zero; you are not saving anything.

I use the food pantry here on campus. It helps and I am grateful, but even then I have to skip meals. Some days I just have breakfast and dinner, some days only dinner. That’s every day, that’s just how it is. Three meals every day, that’s history. This is strange because in Libya I was never hungry, only once I came to America.
I have a son, grandson and my husband living with us. And I have my younger grandkids with us every few weeks. They’re with me more than they are not. My dream is to become self-sufficient and not have to rely on outside services.

My husband is diabetic, so he’s got to watch his carbs and his sugars. He has to have fresh fruits and vegetables when we can find them and that’s more money. And I can’t get enough for everybody, so it’s something we do just for him. We don’t have the variety out here, we kind of have to take what’s there and make the best of it.

We have to skip meals sometimes, to make it to the next pay day. We kind of just live on soup and maybe sandwiches if we can get bread from our church. I had to learn to utilize what I have. I can make a soup out of whatever and it goes a long ways. It makes it hard if the kids won’t eat it, but I have to try.

Tough times, sometimes they help a community grow together. Some families have a little bit more that they’re willing to share with somebody else. I’ve noticed that about Jordan Valley, and that’s a good thing. If you have a little extra, why not give it away?
I live with my husband, my son, my daughter and three teenagers that cannot be at their homes because of some difficult circumstances. So, I have three children that do not belong to me that I support and take care of. Plus the neighboring teenagers that come over because they don’t eat at their house. My husband works full time at the mill and we spend as much as he makes on food. You know it is really expensive to feed so many teenagers. I receive SNAP benefits and it helps, but I can’t claim other people’s kids even though I’m the one feeding them. The dream that I have is that these kids have somewhere to go, because if I have three that live here and another five that hang out, how many do I not know about?

There’s a lot of times my husband and I don’t eat so that the kids can eat. Really, we all skip meals sometimes. At the end of the month, you only have breakfast and dinner... or you only have dinner. It’s really tough on the kids. You run out of food, then what do you do? You just get to the point where you don’t have that hunger pain anymore, even though you are not fulfilled. I try to tell myself that we’ll somehow make it, make something from what we have now and stretch it, but it’s really hard sometimes when you have almost nothing. You eat to survive, not to feel good.
I get seizures and need to take pills so they don't happen. That's very important for me, more than food. I never know ahead of time. If I have a seizure today, I can't tell people what to do, how to help. You have to call the rescue squad because they'll come and give me the right kind of medicine.

Sometimes I can't get food because it's a lot of money. The prices jump so high and they never come back down. That's the hardest thing. But I need that medicine first.

I love everybody around here because everybody loves me. They see how hard I work, how I do things, living peaceful. I don't go to people's doors and ask, "You got any cans?" It's up to them. If they want to give me cans, it's their choice. If they don't want to do it, I don't feel bad.

I collect cans and do odd jobs, too. Cutting some grass or washing cars, that's the only way I can live. Then I can take that money and pay for my medicine card. But that income's hard for me. I wish I didn't have to do it, but I've got to, because I've got to keep that medicine card on. But when I can't get odd jobs and the end of the month comes I'm out of luck. It's hard for me; sometimes I feel really sad. I'm scared bad, but I just keep picking myself up.
I successfully completed parole over eight years ago and I still have a hard time finding a job. After looking for a long time and getting discouraged, I finally got a job at a bar. I think I got it because my boss could hear the desperation in my voice; I was tired of being turned away because of my background. It’s not what I want to be doing, but it’s what I have right now. Even after being successfully off parole for over eight years, my record is still a barrier.

My boss really cares, he knows what it’s like. I actually just got into a place thanks to him. I’m renting from his landlord and he vouched for me. It’s pretty rough and runs me $700 a month, but it’s better than where we were.

MESHELLE My record is still a barrier

I live with my grown kids. One is 25, but mentally she is no older than 13. Every dime that I work for is going toward rent.

There should be a program for folks in the same situation as me. We did our time, we did our parole, and there should be some way to move forward. They say things stay on your record for seven years, but in reality it never goes away. Nobody ever gives ex-cons a break. We should eventually be able to get a job that’s not minimum wage, slinging food somewhere where you really don’t want to be.
I’m proud of just being alive and getting away from my ex-husband. I struggle with bipolar disorder and hypertension and ended up losing my job because I wasn’t physically able to put in the 10 hour shifts it required. I’m on disability now, which doesn’t cover a lot, so being able to come to the pantry for food really helps.

I’m transgender and I started my transition three years ago. I’m proud of who I am, but it’s been difficult. I moved up here from California because my parents separated themselves from me. I don’t have too much of a network up here.

It’s hard for someone who is transitioning in this valley because there is a lot of disdain for transgender people. Also, mental health coverage doesn’t really cover the process here. I have to go to a counselor in Ashland and it’s hard to get there when you don’t drive.

My partner and I have to watch our food budget really closely to make it through the month. If I make something with a lot of protein, I’ll have one piece and give the rest to her because she has a higher metabolism than I do. I don’t really eat that much anyways because of my diabetes and my lactose intolerance. I try to do a little healthy snacking where I can but it’s hard during the last week of the month when our food stamps are gone. We do our best but we still need the food bank.
I’m proud of choosing to go to college, actually getting here and sticking with it. It’s been hard because it’s expensive. When I started I was a full-time student and I worked part-time. Now I am a part-time student and a full-time worker. So, my education has been going at a much slower pace, but I’m determined.

My goal is to be healthy because I am a dancer; I constantly try to be the best I can be physically. It is so expensive to find something that is gluten-free or vegetarian. It helps when they have those things at the food pantry, but it’s not all the time.

You hear so often that people struggling are lazy or not doing what they are supposed to, but that’s not true. I don’t think people would say that to our face. People are put into these situations; some of them are even born into them. People are just trying to make a better life for themselves. Our government needs to step up. We can’t let people continue to struggle or live in poverty, it doesn’t make sense.

The gap between the poor and the rich is just getting bigger even though people are working hard. Our middle class is falling behind. We think this is normal now, so many people barely being above the poverty line, but it’s not. We should be able to live and do what we want and be happy.
I worked in factories of one type or another my whole life. There used to be lots of those jobs, but those jobs aren’t there anymore.

Even with a manufacturing job, back when there were kids in the house we had to make some tough choices. We lived on beans and rice for weeks. Sometimes we ate out of grocery store dumpsters. If there was a blemish on something they’d throw it in the dumpster, and so I would go there at night and get a bag of potatoes or whatever.

We haven’t been in that position in years, but even now we barely make it. Between the food pantry, food stamps and my Social Security, we squeak by, but it doesn’t leave much for everything else. If I want a new pair of shoes I’ve got to wait. We have to save up for five or six months, put change in a penny jar.

Transportation is difficult out here. In little communities a bus system to help people get around would make a big difference. We also need more classes to help people understand what to do with food. It’s easy to buy boxed and processed foods that are relatively cheap, but they’re all really bad for nutrition. People could eat better if they just knew how. There’s a program called gleaners in the valley; they clean up what’s left after harvest. They also do education on food, so people start learning about how to effectively use the food they get.
I'm a nurse, so my kids know if they get hurt I just bandage them up; we don't often go to the doctor.

It really comes down to everyday expenses that are difficult to cover. For us it's the lack of affordable child care. We have four children and simply can't afford the cost of child care—which is about $200 per child a week—so my husband is a stay-at-home dad. I have had some health issues come up and I shouldn't work as much as I do, so my husband has recently gone back to school so he can find a good job. But with him going to school and me working, trying to find somebody to watch our children is almost impossible.

Transportation is also a big expense for us so I take the bus most of the time. My work is 14 miles away from my house. There are days where I walk a mile and half to the bus early in the morning, ride the bus for two hours to get to work, work a 12-hour shift and then have to ride the bus and make the same walk to get back home. And I still have to figure out how to best feed my children, but because I work such long hours I'm not always up to make them nice healthy meals. It makes it really tough.
My dream is a better quality of life. I’ve been disabled since 1991. We ran a non-profit for 20 years for kids and families, but then I developed Meniere’s disease, which affects your balance and hearing, so I couldn’t work anymore. It’s hard to live nowadays, I mean it’s a struggle.

The Lions Club bought my last pair of glasses and I haven’t had a new set of teeth in so many years it’s pathetic. My set of dentures is over 30 some years old. They don’t fit so I just don’t wear them; I’ve learned to gum quite a bit over the years.

And it’s not getting any easier. The doctor just prescribed a certain medication for my wife, but insurance won’t pay for it. It would come to about $15,000 a year they said, for that one medication. I only make $14,000 a year, so how are we going to buy that? We can cut out our whole food budget and you still can’t get that medication. So, there’s certain things we’ve got to suffer with and that’s just life.

The biggest problem is that poor people—we’re fighting a war to survive. The families with children are struggling; they’re fighting the biggest war of their lives right now because with children, you can’t clothe them, you can’t feed them, you know... they’re fighting a war. And nobody’s listening, nobody’s hearing.
We can do better. In a country and a state as strong and as proud as ours, we must take action and fight for systemic changes and compassionate policies that reverse the alarming pattern of sustained high food insecurity rates. We need to take action to shorten the line of people seeking food assistance.

We must repair and strengthen our social safety net and replace the damaged rungs in the economic ladder so people have a fighting chance to provide healthy food for themselves and their families. If we allow these trends to continue, it won’t be long until many more of us have no choice but to join that line.

The good news is not only can we prevent the problem of hunger from getting worse, we can reverse the trends we see now and stamp it out altogether. Hunger is a solvable problem, and together we can end it.

Make the decision to become part of the solution today. We have to end this terrible pattern...because no one should be hungry.

**What you can do to help**

- Share these stories with your friends and colleagues.
- Counteract myths about people in poverty when you hear them.
- Volunteer at your local food pantry, meal site, or food bank.
- Advocate for changes to the policies and structures that keep people trapped in poverty.
The Voices project is only possible because of the contributions, hard work and support of many people and organizations. We’d first like to thank each participant in the focus groups; their decision to make a stand and speak out for themselves and their community is the heart of this report—it is their strength that fuels our efforts every day.

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A well-paid worker is a better worker. Raising their pay a few dollars—
you’re going to get tenfold of the investment you put in.”
—Maureen

My dream is to be able to shelter myself in this community and help others that have problems.
—Douglas

Transportation is something that I struggle with. I have to use my bike all the time and sometimes the places I need to go are far away.
—Norma
Fight Hunger.
Every gift makes an impact.

Please visit oregonfoodbank.org
or call 503-282-0555

About Oregon Food Bank
Oregon Food Bank’s mission: to eliminate hunger and its root causes ... because no one should be hungry. With sufficient public will and support of the entire community, we believe it is possible to eliminate hunger and its root causes. Oregon Food Bank collects and distributes food through a network of four OFB branches and 17 regional food banks serving Oregon and Clark County, Washington. The OFB Network helps nearly 1 in 5 households fend off hunger. OFB also leads statewide efforts to increase resources for hungry families and to eliminate the root causes of hunger through advocacy, nutrition education, garden education and helping communities strengthen local food systems.

www.oregonfoodbank.org/voices
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