We Can End Hunger with People Like Mecca in the Lead

At Oregon Food Bank, we know that hunger is not just an individual experience; it’s also a community-wide symptom of unequal access and barriers to employment, education, housing and health care.

That’s why our work to build community connections that help everyone access nutritious, affordable food is so important. And that work is most effective when people like Mecca are in the lead — those who have faced hunger and know what it takes to build stronger communities.

Mecca was one of thousands of so-called “Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents” (ABAWDs) whose federal food assistance was threatened in recent years by strict work requirements. The new rules brought Mecca to Oregon Food Bank.

“Once I was there, I realized where all the [food] assistance I was getting from the churches and the pantries was coming from,” Mecca remembers. “From all the help I got from the food bank, that’s what makes me want to go in every week and volunteer.”

Mecca experienced congestive heart failure when he lived on the streets. His whole body filled with fluid, doubling in size.  

[continued inside]
Why Lived Experience Matters

I am the cook in my household, and most nights I put three meals on our family table.

Why three? One meal is for my 8-year-old son, who is autistic and consequently a very picky eater. Another is for my 11-year-old son, who has celiac disease and the rare genetic disorder Williams Syndrome, so he has texture sensitivities and gluten would destroy his intestines. And the final meal is for my wife and me.

As a parent, I have daily, lived experience with the challenges of feeding our family. There is no one else who could manage our combination of dietary needs and disability-driven requirements. So I am, quite simply, THE expert. Because I have to be.

In Oregon Food Bank’s effort to end hunger, we look to the experts on hunger – and we find these wise people in food pantries, at meal sites and in senior centers. People who have experienced hunger are THE experts on hunger. Some folks know what it feels like to open the fridge and find only ketchup. Some folks know what it’s like to eat bread and bread and bread again, meal after meal, because that’s all that’s in the house. Some folks know what it feels like to skip meals so that there is enough dinner for their children.

There are, sadly, lots of folks with this lived experience and expertise — 265,000 people each month access food assistance through the Oregon Food Bank Network. And research shows that a staggering 50% of people living in the U.S. will use SNAP food benefits at some point in their lives.

As we enter 2020 and a new decade, Oregon Food Bank commits to investing in community-led change. A big part of this work is engaging people who have experienced hunger as project planners, community organizers, OFB staff, Board members and volunteers. Another piece is making sure that EVERYONE completes this year’s census to guarantee adequate funding for food assistance and other community programs. Because people experiencing hunger are US — and it’s going to take all of us to build resilient communities that never go hungry.

Susannah Morgan
CEO, Oregon Food Bank

[continued from front] He went blind and couldn’t walk or breathe. Without a safe and secure home or decent health care, he found himself in and out of hospitals. Finally, after being connected to proper medical and transitional housing support in the community, Mecca found the stability to change everything about his nutrition and exercise.

Volunteering weekly at Oregon Food Bank became a central component of Mecca’s personal wellness plan. And like so many volunteers who have experienced hunger, his involvement doesn’t end there. He also leads a robust food distribution program at his housing complex. “My volunteer work is what I’m proud of right now,” Mecca says with a grin. “The feeling of helping people like I was helped. It gets into you and you want to keep doing it.” Watch Mecca’s story at oregonfoodbank.org/mecca.
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Historically, Black Americans have not been treated as equal citizens. Post-slavery, those who were “freed” were actually far from free. Black Americans regularly saw their businesses and crops destroyed. Thousands were chased from their homes in the name of urban growth. Entire communities were erased in events like the Vanport flood. Today, predominantly Black neighborhoods consistently lack adequate infrastructure. And government responses to crises remain subpar—as we’ve seen with Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath in New Orleans, Flint’s water crisis, and many other examples.

Black Americans continue to disproportionately experience adversity and hardship, many of which are systemic challenges like unemployment, lack of living wage jobs, or access to nutritious, affordable food.

Nearly half of black children under the age of six currently live in poverty.

At Oregon Food Bank, our goal is to end hunger for good. We pursue this goal in two key ways: by connecting people with the nutritious food they need today; and by working to address the drivers of hunger and poverty — income inequality, systemic racism, mass incarceration, houselessness and more. As we honor Black History Month, we also encourage our community to reflect on these root causes of hunger and think about what we can do together to address them.

One way to take action is by completing the 2020 census. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts a count to determine where and how funding is allocated. Being counted ensures states have the financial resources and political representation we deserve. Oregon is slated to receive $3,200 per person — that’s $13B in revenue at stake statewide. We cannot afford to let this opportunity pass to strengthen our communities! Pledge to be counted at oregonfoodbank.org/census.

Vanport residents evacuate in 1948 when the Columbia River breached the levy and wiped out the entire community.

PHOTO: Oregon Historical Society archives.
2020 Census: Key to Ending Hunger

Every 10 years the government counts our communities to determine how much money we receive for services and resources. Being counted in the census means more political representation and funding for programs that help fight hunger—directly affecting meals in our kids’ schools, SNAP (sometimes called food stamps) and WIC dollars to spend at grocery stores, housing and utility assistance, and more.

The census process begins soon, and the majority of households will receive an invitation to participate by April 1. There are three options to respond: online, by mail or by phone. While the census form can be completed as soon as it’s received, the federal government and local community groups will offer a host of reminders door-to-door, via phone and by mail to help families remember to participate.

Communities that experience hunger often don’t get counted. We don’t get counted because we’re struggling to make ends meet—stretching our dollars and time to balance work, kids and life. When we’re not counted, our communities don’t receive the resources we need.

That’s why the Oregon Food Bank Network is mobilizing in a big way to ensure everyone is counted. We have to help each other and make sure we get this done. #WeCount, and we are in this together!

Questions about the census? Want to get involved in outreach? Visit oregonfoodbank.org/census

MLK Day of Service

In January, more than 400 community members came together for our annual MLK Day of Service! Collectively, these volunteers helped repack an equivalent of 72,000 meals for our community.

Bank of America joined as our presenting sponsor for the ninth year bringing dozens of volunteers! Supporting sponsor Pacific Power also brought a mighty team, and other community groups and families joined in the volunteer day as well.

Watch short recap at oregonfoodbank.org/mlk2020
Congressional Allies Speak Out to Protect SNAP

At Oregon Food Bank, we believe that no one should be hungry. Ever. And one of the most effective programs we have to help combat food insecurity is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—often referred to as SNAP or Food Stamps. Yet the Trump Administration continues to attack these programs with funding cuts and eligibility changes that would worsen hunger for 114,000 people across Oregon.

Fortunately, our congressional delegation has stepped up to defend these critical programs. Dozens of affected individuals were joined recently by Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, along with Representatives Earl Blumenauer and Suzanne Bonamici, at an event to speak out against cuts to SNAP food assistance.

“This is going to be so harmful to the people of our state... and these cuts would have an especially negative effect on Southern and Eastern Oregon, where so many families are walking on an economic tightrope,” said Senator Wyden. “We’re part of a nationwide coalition challenging this effort.”

If implemented, the Administration’s proposals would slash more than $114 million from federal food assistance in Oregon alone. It’s a gap that hunger relief organizations can’t fill—for every meal we provide, SNAP food assistance covers 12.

Check out the press conference video at facebook.com/oregonfoodbank—and take action to protect federal food assistance at oregonfoodbank.org/defendsnap.

2019 Highlights: Together, We are Building Stronger, Hunger-Free Communities

More than 2,000 people participated in cooking and gardening education opportunities • Fewer kids and families face hunger thanks to 50 school pantries • Over 400 health care sites are now screening for food insecurity and referring them to local resources • We helped pass legislation that strengthens anti-hunger programs • The year ended strong with community-wide fundraising support through #GivingTuesday, Willamette Week Give!Guide, Year-End Giving Campaign and seasonal partnerships!
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A generous donation of $50,000 from Genentech Foundation will support our community with as many as 150,000 meals.

Special thanks to First Tech Federal Credit Union for selecting Oregon Food Bank in its Season of Giving campaign.

Thanks to Newman’s Own Foundation, more people in underserved communities have fresh food and nutrition education.

Through its Refer-a-Friend program, OnPoint Community Credit Union raised over $44,000 to help eliminate hunger.

Oregon Food Bank Network of Regional Food Banks

Operated by Oregon Food Bank

Metro Services, PORTLAND

Southeast Oregon Services, ONTARIO

Tillamook County Services, TILLAMOOK

Washington County Services, BEAVERTON

Columbia Gorge Food Bank, THE DALLES

Regional Food Banks

ACCESS Food Share, MEDFORD

CAPECO Food Share, PENDLETON

CCA Regional Food Bank, ASTORIA

Clark County Food Bank, VANCOUVER, WA

Columbia Pacific Food Bank, ST. HELENS

Community Connection, LA GRANDE

FOOD for Lane County, EUGENE

Food Share of Lincoln County, NEWPORT

Josephine County Food Bank, GRANTS PASS

Klamath/Lake Counties Food Bank, KLAMATH FALLS

Linn-Benton Food Share, CORVALLIS

Marion-Polk Food Share, SALEM

NeighborImpact, REDMOND

South Coast Food Share, COOS BAY

UCAN Food Bank, ROSEBURG

YCAP Regional Food Bank, MCMINNVILLE

Thank You for Your Support!

Ameriprise helped fund our Free Food Markets. For six years, Ameriprise has provided crucial support for market-style food distribution!

First Interstate Bank

for inspiring donations in our community that resulted in more than $34,000 from the OSU / UoF Civil War Game.

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Abra Auto Body Repair of America • Ann J. & William Swindells Fund • Applied Materials • B.P., Lester and Regina John Foundation • City of Hillsboro • Clackamas County Health, Housing & Human Services • CoBank • Daimler Trucks North America • Delta Air Lines • Feeding America, thanks to the Red Nose Fund • Goodwill Industries of the Columbia Willamette • Hampton Lumber • Hayes Family Foundation • Intel Corporation • Kaiser Permanente • Kohl’s Department Stores • Lam Research Corporation • Land O’Lakes Foundation • Merle & Ellen Morgan Gift Fund • MJ Chelsea Fund • New Seasons Market • Northwest Farm Credit Services • Northwest Grocers • OCF Joseph E. Weston Public Foundation • Osith Family Foundation • ON Semiconductor • Oregon Tuna Classic • Providence Health & Services • Safeway Albertsons • Tektronix • The Standard • Walmart • Western States Center • Whole Foods Market • Wyndham Vacation Ownership • Zera Foundation

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KGW Great Food Drive kicks off March 1

For over 15 years, the annual KGW Great Food Drive has supported Oregon Food Bank’s goal of ending hunger. Last year, with your help, we raised $515,000 and collected over 40,000 meals’ worth of food for our community! Donate at oregonfoodbank.org/kgw.