



**The Community Foundation of Tompkins County
and United Way of Tompkins County
“Hunger and Food Insecurity in Tompkins County”
Women’s Community Building
September 28, 2004
Executive Summary**

On September 28, 2004 Community Foundation of Tompkins County and the United Way of Tompkins County co-hosted a Critical Issues Roundtable on “*Hunger and Food Insecurity in Tompkins County.*” Attending the roundtable were 108 community representatives, including those who face hunger and food insecurity as part of their daily lives.

Framing the Issue: Hunger and Food Insecurity in Tompkins County

In the United States, hunger and food insecurity are ongoing and increasing problems. In 2001 more than 15% of families with children reported experiencing *food insecurity*, defined as not having enough food or the availability of consistent food supplies. Some of the populations at-risk in experiencing these problems are children, the elderly, the disabled, “homeless youth,” and the working poor.

Hunger and food insecurity in Tompkins County are serious and often invisible problems. Through a community-wide assessment called COMPASS II completed in 2003, the Human Services Coalition and the United Way found that approximately 10% of area survey respondents (over 6,000 individuals and 1,055 families) reported that having enough money for food was a critical problem during the last twelve months. A variety of local resources do exist, such as food pantries, soup kitchens, and food programs (summer food service, senior food services, free/reduced school breakfast/lunch program, child/adult care services), but these outlets are hampered by lack of adequate funding. Those suffering from hunger and food insecurity experience a range of significant barriers in accessing food supplies: cost and availability of transportation in rural areas; food supply distribution schedules that conflict with work times; gaps in the school year and summer feeding programs; difficulty negotiating the bureaucracy; lack of general information about the availability of food; and lack of skills or nutrition education to use the available resources wisely.

Hunger is a product of poverty. Poverty has many complexities, but some of the more pronounced factors contributing to poverty are the high cost of living, housing, and medical care balanced against low-paying jobs or the inability to find work at all. When people are struggling financially, food becomes a “flexible” resource, an area where people can skip or limit their meals in order to make ends meet. Statistics from the Southern Tier suggest that over 44% of food pantry clients choose between paying utilities or heating fuel and eating; over 26% choose between food and mortgage payments; and over 28% choose between food and medical care (*Hunger in America 2001*). Hunger and food insecurity, therefore, are community issues. One step to addressing or overcoming these issues is to answer the basic question: how much are we as residents of Tompkins County willing to tolerate having hunger as a problem for the people who live among us in our communities?

Hunger 101

To help roundtable participants understand the complexities of hunger and food insecurity, **Natasha Thompson**, Director of Agency and Program Services for the Food Bank of the Southern Tier, presented *Hunger 101*. The exercise is based on case studies of real people and the means to which they must go to receive/secure food. Each table was assigned a case and then given the range of available food resources within our community; in addition, participants were given budget limitations for the person/family in question. The group's challenge was to provide 180 meals per month per family member within the defined budget. Only one out of ten tables was able to meet the challenge. In a short reporting session, participants shared the challenges they had faced and their frustrations with the various barriers they had experienced. The exercise set the scene for the broader discussion: how does our community meet the challenge of hunger and food insecurity? The exercise was so successful that participants recommended Hunger 101 be promoted as a community awareness program to be presented at civic clubs, businesses, and other general meetings.

Barriers in Meeting Hunger and Food Insecurity: Knowledge, Access, and Resources

Participants were assigned areas that represent a cluster of barriers when dealing with hunger and food insecurity: Knowledge, Access, and Resources. Each group was asked to consider several questions related to the area of focus:

- Can you think of any barriers people and organizations face when dealing with hunger and food insecurity?
- What are the ways organizations, residents, government, and businesses can reduce or eliminate barriers?
- What are the top three priority ways we can eliminate barriers?

For those discussing Knowledge as a barrier, consideration focused on topics such as information as eligibility, hours of availability, the range of available programs, lack of nutrition education, and the range of skills needed to complete the applications or paperwork involved in receiving or locating food. For those discussing Access as a barrier, topics covered transportation issues, social stigma/prejudices, bureaucratic requirements, work schedule conflicts, dependent care conflicts, and ineligibility. For those considering Resources, topics included caps on program funds, the inappropriateness of many foods available, the insufficient supplies of foods, benefit programs not broad enough (Food Stamps and WIC), the cost of summer camps or alternative feeding programs, and the lack of appropriate food preparation practices or places.

Evaluating Our Progress and Success in Meeting Hunger and Food Insecurity

Next, participants were asked to consider ways our communities in Tompkins County might reduce or eliminate barriers and the means through which we might monitor or evaluate our effectiveness/success in doing so. Once again, participants were given certain questions:

- As a community, what is our goal?
- How will we know that we have done our job?
- How will we measure our progress?

For all, the challenges of hunger and food insecurity did not yield quick answers and reflected the significant complexities of any efforts developed to overcome these problems in Tompkins County. What was most inspiring and exciting was the willingness of all assembled to try to do so.

Results of the General Discussion

Critical Issues Roundtables are characterized as “provocative discussions that lead to action.” From the general discussions, participants reached several areas of general consensus.

- Most agreed that they had learned something new related to the issues at hand. Among the topics cited were:
 - the abundance of available resources and the gaps in knowledge about how to get the resources by those who need them;
 - the needs for general community-wide education for those who could help and those who need help;
 - the high interest and commitment among participants for overcoming hunger and food insecurity in Tompkins County;
 - the layers of issues involved in rural poverty or poverty in general; and
 - the hope that our county could adopt a mission for having food, shelter, and health care as basic rights for all who live in our county.

- Most agreed that the barriers they saw as most challenging were:
 - related to Knowledge, the basic issues of handling/making less complex the paperwork or bureaucratic processes coupled with the need for heightened awareness of possible resources and how these relate to each person’s ability to connect to the resources.
 - related to Access, the needs to ease the barriers of transportation, lack of information, and the supply of coaches or volunteers to help people through the bureaucratic processes.
 - related to Resources, the need to mobilize resources related to transportation and delivery of food; much more funding for food pantries and supply locations to stabilize their capacities to meet the existing needs; strengthening and coordinating agencies, pantries, and other food resources in a more easily negotiated supply network; addressing the issues of “tolerance” and community expectations/attitudes for accepting the existence of hunger among us as residents of Tompkins County.

- Most agreed that promising opportunities or “next steps” should include:
 - broadly based public awareness and educational programs related to the situations of hunger and food insecurity for residents of our county;
 - progress in addressing legislative or political situations that complicate the systems already in place to help people get the food they need; and
 - help in addressing the personal and emotional needs of the hungry (i.e. self-confidence, hope, acceptance, literacy, food choices/preparation skills).
 - increased funding to stabilize the pantry system and its capacities to serve the hungry.

What became clear in the general discussion was a better understanding of the role of food pantries and volunteerism related to these outlets. Many commented on the dedication of the people who staff the pantries and the missionary-like contributions these people are making in the lives of the needy.

When asked for their individual commitments to helping, 76 people (90%) of participants said *yes* to being part of future actions that will help alleviate hunger and food insecurity in Tompkins County. Ways they identified to help were:

- increased volunteering themselves or recruiting others to help;
- helping to develop and disseminate community-wide public education efforts;
- providing outreach for services, supplies, and counseling/processing help;
- working with the schools to broaden the help for children and families who are hungry.

Next Steps: United Way Ready to Take the Lead

Community involvement and awareness are essential to alleviate or reduce the issues of hunger and food insecurity in Tompkins County. The roundtable has proven to be a valuable resource for United Way. The findings and discussions from the roundtable will be incorporated in United Ways' efforts to access the scope and causes of hunger and food insecurity in Tompkins County. In partnership with individuals and organizations, United Way is developing and will act upon focused and measurable service delivery solutions. That an agency has accepted a leadership role for this work is essential, for without such leadership and coordination, even the best efforts will be compromised. We applaud United Way for its commitment.

Summary and Thanks to All

The Critical Issues Roundtables represent a series of community-focused conversations hosted by the Community Foundation in its role as convener for exploring unmet needs and community-wide opportunities. Critical Issues Roundtables are intended to encourage more effective strategic decision-making and planning practices, promote positive results for our communities, and foster enlightened philanthropy. The Community Foundation invites others to co-host these meetings as a means of encouraging partnerships, fostering collaborative efforts, and identifying the natural leaders who are prepared to pursue next steps. In its role as leading advocate for the social services in Tompkins County, United Way holds significant interest in building community-wide efforts that diminish or eradicate issues such as hunger and food insecurity. We thank Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County, Food Bank of the Southern Tier, and the network of food pantries for their ongoing work to reduce hunger and food insecurity.

Vital to this community discussion on hunger and food insecurity was the dedicated Planning Team whose work spanned many months and whose wisdom identified the main discussion points. These people are: **James Brown**, *President/CEO, United Way of Tompkins County and co-host*; **Eric Clay**, *Chair, Grants Committee, Community Foundation of Tompkins County*; **Marge Dill**, *Director, Human Services Coalition*; **Joanne Florino**, *Executive Director, Triad Foundation*; **Ardyth Gillespie**, *Professor/Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University*; **Peg Hendricks**, *Executive Director, Community Foundation of Tompkins County*; **Paul Hesler**, *Executive Director, Food Bank of the Southern Tier*; **Lisa Horn**, *Special Consultant, United Way of Tompkins County/COMPASS II*; **Helen Howard**, *Regional Nutrition Coordinator, Tompkins County Cornell Cooperative Extension*; **Jean Owens**, *Coordinator, Tompkins County Food Distribution Network*; **Kathy Schlather**, *Planner, Tompkins County Department of Social Services*; **Ken Schlather**, *Executive Director, Tompkins County Cornell Cooperative Extension*; and **Natasha Thompson**, *Director of Agency & Program Services, Food Bank of the Southern Tier*.

On behalf of the Community Foundation of Tompkins County and the United Way of Tompkins County, we thank all who participated on this roundtable about Hunger and Food Insecurity in Tompkins County.