

Russ Russell of Forgotten Harvest speaks on hunger in Detroit

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The WSWs spoke with Russ Russell, chief operating officer of Detroit-based nonprofit Forgotten Harvest, which specializes in the recovery of surplus or discarded food. Russell was attending the Third Annual Holiday Dinner sponsored by his organization along with the Detroit Marriott Hotel (see “Hunger in Detroit area on the rise”).

WSWS: What is the chief issue you are facing?

RR: “The hunger issue is still the number-one need in metro Detroit. And the good news is that the supply of food in the region is [large] enough that no one needs to go hungry. There are over 1 billion pounds of food that, unfortunately, enter the landfill. The uniqueness of Forgotten Harvest is to have our 34 refrigerated trucks, some are tractor-trailers, scouring the 2,000 square miles of metro Detroit to rescue over 3 million pounds each and every month compared to 2 million last year at this time.

We will somehow, some way, get between 31 million to 36 million pounds of food rescued and delivered to over 200 agencies free of charge. Three years ago, we were providing around 12 million pounds of food. You look back 11 years, and we were only rescuing 1 million pounds of food. Some people say, “why the heck are you growing that fast?” We are growing only because the need is so tremendous. It’s the 200 agencies that we provide food to who are in desperate need for more food. And to get that food and receive it free of charge allows them to focus more on their mission: assist people in the shelters; assist children who go home hungry after school. Weekends and holidays and the summertime are not fun times for kids who face hunger every single day. It is unfortunate, but the hunger gap is going to grow to about 300,000,000 meals for the about 800,000-850,000 people who live in poverty throughout the metropolitan region.

WSWS: That is a staggering number.

RR: Yes it is. They don’t know where their next meal is going to come from. I am not just talking Detroit, Pontiac

and Ypsilanti. I am talking about places like Canton and Troy and Madison Heights, Royal Oak and Clawson. Every community is facing this hunger issue, and it is just a hidden problem, because you don’t know that your neighbor isn’t able to put food on their table. You don’t know that the senior that might be living next door to you or the family that lost their jobs and have kids are struggling to find food. When people are on fixed incomes like the elderly with the increase in the cost of food, how in the world are you going to be able to pay for the high utility costs? So food often becomes the one thing that they go without. The other staggering issue is that our food, which was once used for emergency purposes, is now being used to sustain individuals or entire families that are in need.

WSWS: It used to be just for emergencies? How long ago was that the situation?

RR: When the stock market crashed, we knew that the world had changed. The people who experienced it are suffering daily now. It is not where it is once a month or twice a month. Hunger is a daily occurrence. It is a daily struggle for those who have been left behind. It is staggering. I appreciate the fact that you guys are willing to talk about it. In a country like ours of abundance, where 25 percent of all the food that is manufactured or produced enters the landfill, no one should have to go hungry.

WSWS: You collect food that has already been cooked and prepared?

RR: Yes, some of that, like the food at the ballparks or the casinos or even the Marriott where 1,000 are scheduled to come to a dinner and only 600 show up. What do they do with the other 400 meals? That is just one little piece of it though. The food really is with big manufacturers like US Foods or Sysco who have waste. So when anyone [any company] tells you, “I don’t have any waste food around,” well, that is just not true. What

Forgotten Harvest is able to do is take food that is short-dated; it could be the meat from Kroger where it says “sell by date.” Well the ‘sell by date’ is not the actual expiration date. So we are able to get that food right before the “sell by date.” So what Kroger does for us is they freeze it so it is still good, still amazingly wonderful.

Protein is the biggest problem we are having for young children. You look at obese children in these impoverished neighborhoods—it is from a lack of healthy food. These kids are really malnourished, and they are eating processed food that will fill their bellies but not fill nutritional requirements. Protein is the most important thing a young child needs who is in preschool and growing. That is when their minds are developing. If they don’t have protein, they are going to struggle the rest of their lives, whether it is through obesity, whether it is through learning, or a number of issues. So again, the amazing thing to us is that hunger does not need to exist in our community, when 1 billion pounds of food enter the landfill.

WSWS: Are you struggling with funding?

RR: Every day is a struggle because three years ago we were distributing 12 million pounds of food. To distribute 36 million pounds of food still costs us about 20 cents per meal or per pound. One meal equals one pound. That is based on US Department of Agriculture numbers. The issue around money is that when we are not funded, our trucks are not able to roll. When we are funded, we are the most efficient food rescue organization in the entire nation. We are a unique organization that has had to grow because of the tremendous need.

WSWS: What percentage of your funding is public versus private?

RR: We receive about 3 or 4 percent from the government. It is very little, as you can see. Fifty-one percent comes from individuals at an average gift of around \$75. The rest is corporate.

WSWS: Hunger is still growing.

RR: The hunger gap as far meals is around 170 million meals locally, based on a study, and it is going to grow to about 300 million by 2013. The annual meal gap I think will double. Those who are losing cash assistance [welfare benefits] are putting another problem on top of the existing problem. The 800,000 number was a 2010 number [before the cutoff of cash assistance welfare to 41,000 people in Michigan, including 30,000 children]. The 2011 number—even though the unemployment situation might look better, the underemployed are the real key here. Underemployment has grown significantly

in the area because people are making less in wages and still having some of the same mortgages and some of the same costs. So many people are working two or three different jobs.

It is not about people being lazy in this community. The stereotypes are not accurate. It is the elderly who are suffering, who are on a fixed income and thought things were going to be OK. People who fall on hard times due to catastrophic sickness or things like that. That really puts people in peril and quickly in a downward spiral.

WSWS: There is now means testing for those who apply for food stamps. So there are a lot of people who are not applying.

RR: We are not in favor of the asset test. For example, for families that have recently become unemployed and have two vehicles, I think they just allow one vehicle. But still, if you have a car, are you going to asset-test people when they are unemployed and they need a car? These are real people. They talk about the person in the Upper Peninsula who won the lottery and stayed on benefits. I can show about 800,000 others who aren’t like that, who are struggling to make sure there is food on the table for their children. These are the conditions: Am I going to be able to eat today? Am I going to be able to feed my children? It is not unfamiliar when a child says, “My sister eats on Wednesday and I eat on Thursday.” These things happen right here in our area.

The whole issue around food in America just doesn’t make sense, because the food is there.

WSWS: What about the issue of child homelessness?

RR: You have probably seen this series on *60 Minutes* about the children who are living in hotels or in cars. It is unfortunate that any child or any person faces hunger. In some of the key areas they will get the school lunch. Or maybe they will get the school snack. But when they are out of school with the Christmas holiday, it is not fun for these kids. They don’t know where their next meal is coming from. Any holiday, when you are hungry, it is not fun. I have been very lucky. I can’t imagine what it would be like to wonder if I am going to eat breakfast or how long is it going to be that I am hungry.



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