

Mounting hunger in western Wisconsin

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While the Obama administration proclaims “the crisis is passed,” and the US economy is well on the way to recovery, social distress is mounting in many areas of the United States, particularly in those where factory jobs were the mainstay of working-class living standards.

In western Wisconsin, where lumber and manufacturing remain deeply depressed, three food pantry directors recently described the rapidly growing demand for emergency food supplies in an interview with the Eau Claire public radio station.

The three were responding to the question: “So since the economy is recovering, we should see less demand on the food pantries in western Wisconsin. Right?”

Emily Moore, administrator of the Feed My People Food Bank of Eau Claire, said, “That’s not our experience. In the last five years, we have seen our demand for food triple. We are now giving out over 125,000 pounds of food a week.”

On the Wisconsin Public Radio show *The West Side*, host Rich Kremer interviewed Ms. Moore, Jennifer Sandberg of the Mondovi, Wisconsin food pantry, and Jayne Stewart, director of Paul’s Pantry and Kitchen in Rice Lake, Wisconsin.

All three food pantry directors declared that food demand has soared in the face of unremitting boasts by the Obama administration of the supposed economic recovery.

Stewart said the food bank in Rice Lake dispensed 189,000 pounds per month in 2009 and nearly three times that amount, 478,000 pounds per month, in 2014.

In Mondovi, Wisconsin, 23 miles south of Eau Claire, food used from the pantry has doubled every year for the last several years, according to Sandberg, who is a member of the board of directors of that food bank.

In the face of the state and federal government declarations of an economic recovery, Moore pointed out that Wisconsin child poverty is at a 20-year high.

The three women noted that both the unavailability of full-time work—with many people working multiple jobs—and the unavailability of full-time work drive the food insecurity crisis to which they are witness every day.

Demands on food banks see seasonal variations as well, with increased hunger among adults and children alike during the summers, when subsidized meals at public schools are unavailable, and winters, when heating bills consume dollars needed to buy food. Soaring propane prices, combined with the record harsh winter of 2013-2014, hit the working poor with an unprecedented ferocity.

Moore noted that persons return to the Eau Claire food bank an average of nine times per year. In October 2014 alone, the food bank saw 2,000 new people, in a county with a total population of just over 100,000.

She also noted that the majority of people obtaining food from the Eau Claire pantry are employed and have a residence. Approximately six percent of the Eau Claire food pantry clients are homeless.

Stewart reported that most persons using the Rice Lake pantry are the elderly, working class and students. All three food bank directors noted that the continued cutbacks to the federal food stamp program (SNAP) have added to the severity of the hunger crisis, and each of the directors confirmed instances in which persons were compelled to choose between vitally required medical care and eating.

Four years after Obama’s inauguration, a 2012 study called *Map the Food Gap* found 12.6 percent of Wisconsin persons were food-insecure, tallying 724,000 hungry people—a number greater than the population of the state’s largest city, Milwaukee.

Sandberg noted that in western Wisconsin, many more poorly paid adults and their children are moving into apartments and single-family homes with their grandparents and other unrelated adults, forcing them

into more crowded living conditions just to make ends meet. These arrangements are inherently unstable, often changing from month to month.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), one in five children in the United States is hungry. One-third of children attending Wisconsin public schools are living below the official poverty line. In the 110 public school districts, at least 50 percent of children qualify for free or reduced priced lunches.

Deb Zais, food service coordinator in the Stanley-Boyd district, east of Eau Claire, said, “You can see that these students are hungry. When kids are hungry they are not thinking about anything else, not school, not even having fun, they are just thinking about a full belly.”

The USDA reports that it costs a family of four with two school-age children an average of at least \$190 a week to eat, or \$826 a month. At the government’s official poverty, that means half of all income is spent on food.

Emily Moore said that a good measure of a community’s hunger level can be seen in the length of the school lunch line, which is often the only meal a child will receive the whole day.

Of the 14 Wisconsin counties where there are Feed My People food banks, over 69,950 persons live in poverty, according to a Poverty and Population estimate of the US Census Bureau—a whopping 76 percent increase from the 2000 census.

One food bank client described the misery of food stamp cutbacks and the resulting hunger to Feed My People: “the day I call (the food stamp office) to say, ‘Hey, I got a job. It’s a temporary position, contracted 160 hours. ‘As of that day ... she’s like, ‘Well, you won’t get any food stamps next month then.’ Meanwhile you’re really hungry at work and haven’t gotten paid yet. And then sometimes they hold back a check, too. Yeah, it took me four weeks to get my first check.”



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