

SSCRC Food Pantry News

Student Volunteers Help the Food Pantry and Community

The SSCRC Food Pantry regularly has children and youth as volunteers. Most months at least two or three students from SSCRC help out at the food pantry distribution. Our youngest helpers at food distributions have been in kindergarten, and even younger kids help with sorting food.

We have also had other student volunteers from the community, including from Northwood High School and students who found the SSCRC Food Pantry on the Montgomery County Volunteer Center's website.

This February we started a unique relationship with Forcey Christian School. The middle school's National Junior Honors Society, including Sam Verbrugge, decided to sponsor a food drive for the SSCRC food pantry.



Forcey students help sort food they collected for the SSCRC food pantry

The students asked the school community to bring in items that we commonly need. They delivered the food to church and helped sort it so that it would be ready to distribute. Overall the students collected **662** pounds of food. Some of the students, along with teachers and some parents, helped with the food pantry distribution.

In May the Food Pantry Director spoke to about 60 middle school students at Forcey about hunger in Montgomery County. The students

wanted to know how many people are hungry in Montgomery County, why there are hungry people in such a wealthy county, and what they can do to help raise awareness and do something to reduce hunger. We also talked about how the food pantry works and why our church decided to serve the community through the food pantry.

Partnering with Forcey was a great opportunity, and we hope to continue the relationship next year.

Hygiene Closet Project

We have applied for a grant from the CRC's Sustaining Congregational Excellence program to add a "hygiene closet" to the food pantry. Hygiene products are a need that is often overlooked in emergency assistance – essential household goods such as toilet paper, facial tissue, soap, feminine products, and other personal hygiene items are costly and are not as widely available as food assistance. Providing hygiene products addresses a basic need and allows a household to redirect financial resources to other areas. Grant award decisions will be made in mid-July.



Forcey middle school students volunteered at the food pantry in March along with church volunteers

SSCRC Kids at the Food Pantry

SSCRC kids have helped with many areas of the food pantry: food sorting, set up, and distribution. When they sort food, they bring paper bags and cardboard cartons to the dumpster, where they love to smash it down by jumping on it.

At distribution, they help with almost everything: handing out tickets and food, breaking down boxes, cleaning up, and being friendly to those who come. Participants look forward to seeing them. Our kids are amazing workers, and we are glad to have them working at the food pantry alongside family, friends, and community members.

Here are a few things kids have to say about their experiences working at the food pantry.

Jacob: We one time met a friend named Daniel and we played and talked together. I like helping set up on Sunday nights. I liked restocking the tables with food.

Ben: I like to organize food and give out tickets to people.

Noah: I liked helping to carry boxes of food to people's cars and I also liked getting to smash down boxes. I liked working at the cereal and juice table with Grandma Judy. One time I met a friend named Daniel at food pantry who was my age and we talked outside

for a while, but I never saw him again.

Oliver: I like to help sort the food for the food pantry. I like helping at the juice table. I like to help people get food.

Margot: I like organizing the food.

Sam: Sorting the food is the best.



Getting To Know You: Laura's Story

Laura* comes to the food pantry most months. She works 30 hours per week as an activity assistant at a rehabilitation center. She is studying to get her medical billing and coding license.

Laura and her husband, son, daughter-in-law, and four grandchildren (ages 8 and under) share a home. Her husband is disabled from kidney disease. He is unable to work, and Laura says he can't do any one thing (like sit, stand, or lay down) for very long at a time. Her son and daughter-in-law work part time jobs and

coordinate childcare with Laura.

Laura explained that a relatively low household income and high medical bills make it difficult to make ends meet. Although Laura has health insurance from her work, the deductibles are very high and her husband needs separate insurance to cover his needs.

Laura is grateful for the SSCRC food pantry. Her grandchildren enjoy a variety of foods that Laura can prepare with foods from the food pantry, such as macaroni and cheese, curry and rice, beans and

rice, and tacos. Her husband has very specific dietary needs. Most canned and shelf stable foods do not work for his diet; however, he needs fresh produce. The food pantry helps their family because it lets them go longer between grocery trips and redirect their food money to meet Laura's husband's dietary needs or to purchase essential (but expensive) non-food items like laundry detergent.

* Name changed to protect privacy

Understanding the Issue: Children and Hunger in Montgomery County

In April Montgomery County released a five-year strategic plan to reduce hunger in the county. The plan, *A Food Secure Montgomery*, summarizes current data on hunger in the county, identifies needs, and lays out goals for the county to work towards. SSCRC food pantry participants

In 2016, an estimated 77,000 people experienced food insecurity in Montgomery County; 33,000 of them were children.

contributed to the development of the plan at a listening session we held at church last fall. This article summarizes a small portion of information from the plan that relates to children.

What does it mean to talk about hunger in Montgomery County? Hunger is also referred to as “food insecurity.” Food insecurity is generally defined as not having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. According to the USDA, this can include reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet or disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake, like not eating enough or skipping meals.

Hunger and poverty are not the same. In fact, some people in poverty could actually experience less food insecurity than people whose incomes are too far above the poverty level to qualify for assistance programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly food stamps).

In 2016 an estimated 77,000 people experienced food insecurity in Montgomery County; 33,000 of them were children. Children who were at the highest risk of food insecurity were non-white and lived in single parent households.

Hunger is considered a symptom of poverty as well as a root cause. Among children food insecurity can have long term effects. Children who experience ongoing food insecurity are more likely to be absent or tardy from school and tend to make slower progress in reading and math. They are more likely to be overweight, and they have a higher risk for developing a mental illness.

Children benefit from a variety of school-based programs aimed at reducing food insecurity. The strategic plan aims to increase participation of eligible families to reduce food insecurity.

Some programs are federally funded, such as the Free and Reduced-Price Meals (FARMS). Within MCPS, approximately 35% of students receive FARMS. This means that their families make no more than 130% of the federal poverty level to qualify for free meals or 185% for reduced-price meals. In 2016, for a family of 4, those levels were \$31,590 and \$44,955, respectively. Some families who receive reduced-price meals struggle to pay the small fee for lunches.

Other programs are supported by the state and non-profits. The state-funded Maryland Meals for Achievement program provides universal free breakfast at 75 low income schools. A group of non-profits, including MANNA and the Capital Area Food Bank provide weekend back packs for over 4,600 students each week, but many more could benefit. MCPS estimates that 20-30% of students receiving FARMS do not have enough food on the weekends.

If you would like to know more, you can read more about hunger, current programs, the strategic plan the Montgomery County Food Council’s website at mocofoodcouncil.org.