



## On the Fence

# What are the best steps to help hungry children in Union County?

### Elect Leaders who support economic justice

Polling shows Democrats, Independents, Republicans, men, women and voters from all parts of the country think that hunger is a serious problem and are interested in ending it. Many of us would even define ending hunger as a moral imperative.

Why then did more than 187,000 Oregon households experience “food insecurity” and more than 81,000 of them experience “very low food insecurity” on average during 2016-2018?

Part of the answer is that many of our neighbors live in households that are poor and simply don’t earn or receive enough income to afford to buy adequate food. Oregon’s poverty rate in 2018 was 12.6%. Oregon’s child poverty rate was 15.8%. Employment at a living wage is the first line of defense against hunger.

Most Oregonians who are able to work — who are not too young, too old, too ill — are employed but are too often challenged by costly housing, child care and other expenses that compete with the purchase of food.

Another part of the answer to why people are hungry is, in the words of Art Simon, that “hunger thrives on the racial, social, and economic extremes that are eating away at the soul of our nation and are pulling us apart.” In “Silence Can Kill: Speaking Up to End Hunger and Make Our Economy Work for Everybody,” Simon points out that millions of Americans contribute to charity through soup kitchens, food drives and pantries yet remain enablers of hunger through their silence as citizens. Government programs, he says, do far more than charity does to erase hunger.

Can charity solve hunger? Let’s take a look at Union County. What are we doing to help hungry children? What else do we need to do?

Community Connection of Northeast Oregon is the regional food bank for four counties. It distributes food to 18 food banks and several harvest share and fresh alliance sites. Its 2017 IRS 990 form reports receiving \$903,395 in in-kind commodities, produce and Second Harvest foods for distribution. Seven of those food banks are in Union County. Let’s assume \$500,000 worth of food is distributed here in Union County contributed through Community Connection, the scouts, the



**BILL WHITAKER**  
UNION COUNTY  
PROGRESSIVES/DEMOCRATS

postal service and Les Schwab and other food drives, our religious and social organizations, back-pack programs, holiday food baskets. A half-million dollars is a lot of charity.

But charity alone cannot end hunger. Charity must be partnered with justice through the taxes we pay to fund public anti-hunger programs. We do far more to reduce hunger through our taxes — our membership fees for participating in a just society — than we can through individual acts of charity.

Union County residents receive more than \$347 million dollars in federal food assistance — school lunches, \$115.5 million; school breakfasts, \$38.7 million; SNAP/food stamps, \$78.1 million; summer nutrition program, \$5 million; WIC, \$63.8 million; child and adult food care, \$36.8 million; the emergency food assistance program, \$8.8 million; commodity supplemental food program, \$0.6 million.

Ending childhood hunger in Union County means making the United States a nation in which all people have the adequate and nutritious food they need. This is an achievable goal. Important steps include: (1) Creating jobs, raising wages, increasing opportunity and sharing prosperity; (2) Improving government income-support programs for struggling families; (3) Strengthening SNAP and Child Nutrition Programs; (4) Working with states, localities and nonprofits to expand and improve participation in federal nutrition programs; and (6) Building political will.

Silence is a political act. We must reject silence, speak truth to power and act on behalf of hungry neighbors. Persons of good will — that should be all of us — need to choose active citizenship and work to end hunger by electing leaders who support economic justice, who strengthen rather than shred social safety-net programs.

We know the outcome of elections has a bigger impact on the poor than on the rest of us. Knowing that makes voting to end hunger a moral decision.

(All data are from the Food Research and Action Center.)

### Donate funds, items and time to local efforts

There are excellent people in our town and county. I’m sure you know that already, but I’d like to introduce you to some more. I set out to meet the people serving children in our area, find out what their challenges are, and how we all can add to those efforts.

My first stop was the Center for Human Development. For those fallen on hard times and particularly mothers with new infants and very young children, this should be a first stop too. Located at the corner of Cove Ave and North Albany, Street CHD provides many health (physical and mental) and employment services, both free and with costs scaled according to income. Carrie Brogoitti, CHD’s public health administrator, wants to make sure those with low incomes and children younger than 5 know about the WIC (Women Infants and Children) food and education program. CHD also points people in the right direction for resources available in the community.

How can we help? Center for Human Development is a nonprofit, so funds are always appreciated. Also, be sure to point people their way.

Across the street, consummate volunteer Hanna Brandsma works the desk at Community Connection. Community Connection is the hub for local food banks, distributing commodities from the Oregon Food Bank and the USDA as well as groceries donated by local businesses. The organization offers multiple programs, some with no red tape around income requirements. A list of food pantries can be found at [www.ccn.org](http://www.ccn.org).

One of Community Connection’s greater issues is outgrowing the warehouse space, but there are still specific things in short supply. Hygiene items such as toilet paper, soap and feminine care products are needed by most people who need food, but those aren’t as obvious to most of us considering a donation. Just about every provider I talked to expressed an acute need for these things. Pantries have an overabundance of food like beans and rice. Often, people have a poverty of experience cooking from scratch ingredients.

How can we help? Donate hygiene products and can openers. Or donate your time. There is a particular need for volunteers to heft boxes around at the Harvest Share sites.

For helping children directly, the Friday Backpack Program provides eligible grade school children with food to see them through the weekend. To help, contact the program at



**NATHAN SMUTZ**  
UNION COUNTY REPUBLICANS

[fridaybackpack@gmail.com](mailto:fridaybackpack@gmail.com) and go to [www.unioncountyfridaybackpack.org](http://www.unioncountyfridaybackpack.org) for a list of desired goods.

Bill Grigsby, a professor at EOU, is quick to praise current and former EOU students who bootstrapped Haven from Hunger. Haven from Hunger is focused on providing emergency three-day food supplies. Haven also stocks the food box outside the K-House and the food bins at the entrance of Cook Memorial Library. Beyond hunger, Grigsby aims to tackle food insecurity, uncertainty about where one’s next meal is coming from. Haven is making efforts to change social factors causing people to hesitate in taking what they need.

How can we help? Donate toilet paper, feminine hygiene products, soap, shampoo, laundry detergent and can openers. Grigsby has a real vision for Haven as a student effort and would like to see as many student volunteers as possible. See Haven’s Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/groups/HavenfromHunger](http://www.facebook.com/groups/HavenfromHunger)) or call 541-786-3663.

Shelter From the Storm provides safety and resources for those experiencing domestic violence. The organization keeps a food bank requiring no red tape for access and it serves a broad group of people. Of the providers I contacted, SFS is less in need of hygiene products (at least as far as soap and shampoo are concerned) and more in need of food items.

How can we help? Right now SFS would really like to see meat and frozen vegetables in its pantry.

The most important “help” children receive is from their parents. Next Step is, among other things, a group of grandmas and experienced mothers who welcome and support brand-new parents. The organization provides prenatal and parenting education as well as “Baby Bundles” and newborn supplies. The Next Step folks want to make it clear that they’re here for all new parents whether low income or not.

How can we help? Next Step is in need of toddler coats, diapers and blankets.

There are many more unsung heroes in our midst. Wherever your passion to help, there’s probably someone already there with their hand to the plow. Come alongside and strengthen their efforts.

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Phone: **541-963-3161**

Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-422-3110  
Fax: 541-963-7804  
Email: [news@lagrandeobserver.com](mailto:news@lagrandeobserver.com)  
Website: [www.lagrandeobserver.com](http://www.lagrandeobserver.com)  
Street address: 1406 Fifth St., La Grande

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