

Hunger's Growing Pangs Strengthen Will of Area Food Banks

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It is an alarming reality.

A family of four living with a household income of \$50,000 to \$80,000 a year may still go hungry in the D.C. area.

Hunger advocates have learned that when money is tight, food falls further down on the list of priorities as expenses for housing, childcare, transportation and healthcare, in that order, consume household budgets first.

With less money to go around to support the ever increasing costs of living, local food banks are feeling a greater demand while supplies of food are diminishing.

But representatives from the nearly 700 non-profit organizations who are served by the Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB) were offered words of inspiration and encouragement, as well as strategies to better serve its constituents during the 28th Metropolitan Area Hunger Conference held last Friday at Allen Chapel AME Church in Southeast.

More than 300 providers from local churches, community organizations and pantries circulated throughout the three-story building to participate in workshops on topics including "The True Face of Hunger," "Faith and Distribution," "Emergencies, Disasters and the Role of Food Pantries" and "Power Cooking with the Pampered Chef," to name a few.

Senator Ulysses Curry (District 25, Prince George's County) moderated the opening session and declared, "We are facing a crisis in this world...a food crisis," which is why, he reported, he has pushed for greater funding for programs that feed the hungry including CAFB.

The CAFB has reported that an estimated 633,000 residents in the metro area are at risk of or experiencing hunger. That number includes working families, single-parent

households and senior citizens. To address the growing needs, the CAFB distributes more than 20 million pounds of food through more than 700 agencies in the D.C. region.

While media reports highlighted the crisis CAFB faced during the holiday season last year, J. Brian Smith, CEO of the Capital Area Food Bank, expressed extreme optimism on Friday as he outlined his vision for the CAFB's future.

Every year is a challenge," Smith admitted, "but it is not all doom and gloom." CAFB is expanding its food resources and getting more people involved.

"Safeway and Giant have always been on the CAFB Board [of Directors]," Smith said, "but now we have added the vice president of Whole Foods and Shoppers Food Warehouse. We have been able to open their eyes to the needs."

Craig Muckle, Public Affairs manager for Safeway Stores, presented Smith with a check for \$113,000 derived from the proceeds of an in-store fundraising campaign called Round-Up Hunger. Safeway patrons were asked to round up the change from their purchases to the nearest dollar which, in turn, helped to support CAFB.

Smith further outlined plans to open a new and larger CAFB facility that will provide much needed expanded refrigerator space, room for more bulk items, better displays to accommodate customers, expanded Kids Café programs, as well as a lounge and resource center with computers to assist with the broad myriad of social service needs.

"That's our dream," Smith said, "and our goal to address the suffering among the people we serve."

According to Smith, the land for the new facility was purchased in 2005 and while fundraising efforts are ongoing, the District government and State of Maryland have been very supportive. "Virginia," he said, "has contributed, as well."

Smith hopes to open the new CAFB facility somewhere between July and October 2009.

“I was very happy when Reverend Carolyn Scales shared her desire to open a food bank here at the church,” explained Reverend Michael E. Bell, Sr., pastor of Allen Chapel AME Church. “As we encourage our members to improve their spiritual and physical lives, we also want them to strive for healthier lives. It is great to be able to provide healthy food in a community where the need is so great.”

Under the direction of Reverend Scales, Allen opened its food bank within the last six months.

This year’s keynote speaker was Washington Post reporter Hamil Harris whose sermon-like message focused on the theme, “Sit the People Down.” He referenced the sixth chapter of Mark which he referred to as “a powerful story of a feeding program.”

“There is a new face of poverty,” he said. “You’re not just feeding the documented poor; you’re feeding people who are falling between the cracks – the people who are just barely holding on to those \$500,000 homes, and don’t have enough money to feed their families.”

“Our nation is starving. What do we do next? Bring the people together and sit the people down,” Harris said, and by doing so, he added, “you will get the attention of the legislators, the corporations and the media. Today, we’re all here.”