



Photos courtesy Wellspring

Wellspring food bank director Linda Hansen directs drivers lined up for a food-pantry event at Bishop Dwenger High School on March 31.

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A gnawing concern

Domino effects of COVID-19 crisis reveal depth of area's hunger problem

Melissa Rinehart

Some of you may think you know what food insecurity is, but I ask you to keep reading. Understanding what food insecurity is theoretically versus the reality of your neighbor not knowing where their next meal is coming from are two very different things.

According to Feeding America, food insecurity is a household's inability to provide enough food to live a healthy life. In the United States, one in nine people struggles with hunger; in Indiana, one in eight people faces hunger daily. Even more concerning is that one in six Hoosier children experiences hunger regularly.

The eruption of COVID-19 quickly revealed how much families relied on schools to provide their children nutrition with 30 million children relying on school meals five days a week. But those of us who work in human services have long recognized the deleterious effects of food insecurity.

- Teachers observe how students perform differently because they don't have adequate nutrition. How does a student pay attention in class when his stomach is growling?
- Social workers see how clients get distracted from their treatment plan when they don't have adequate nutrition. Who will look for work or find better housing when the grumbles of hunger distract them?
- Health care providers have long understood the effects of inadequate nutrition from birth on and its continued impact on development. How does a person manage diabetes when she cannot stay atop of her prescriptions, let alone afford food?

As I followed the evolution of COVID-19 in China earlier this year, my anxieties increased substantially.

Friends, colleagues and family didn't always share my concern, but I watched and read with a discerning eye.

It wasn't a matter of "if this comes to Fort Wayne" but "when this comes to Fort Wayne." I wondered how best to respond to this inevitable crisis at an organizational level.

Wellspring's mission addresses many basic needs – from food and clothing to education and recreation for seniors and children alike. While some of these programs are temporarily suspended on account of social distancing restrictions, I anticipated an increased demand in our food programming via the onsite food pantry and newly established mobile food pantries.

As the number of Hoosiers testing positive with COVID-19 increased, so did patronage at our food pantries. From February to April, we experienced a 535% increase at our mobile food pantries and an 84% increase at our onsite food pantry.

Food providers understand the realities of food insecurity because we see it daily. But COVID-19 has shined a spotlight on the extent of those in our community who live on the economic margins – those who can normally afford food but who without a paycheck can no longer afford it.

It will be some time until we comprehend the full human, social and economic toll of COVID-19.

A natural disaster of whatever origin, whether a flood, pandemic, blizzard or tornado, only reveals what many of us on the front lines know to be true. Living on the economic margins, whether you're one paycheck or no paycheck away from nutritional disaster, is no way to live.

Not only is food essential to our collective survival, I believe we have a moral obligation to ensure that our community has access to this most basic of human needs.

Melissa Rinehart is executive director of Wellspring Interfaith Social Service.