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# Feeding Our Hungry: An Interview with Rachel Bristol of the Oregon Food Bank

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# Feeding Our Hungry

*An interview with Rachel Bristol of The Oregon Food Bank  
by Suzanne Feeney*

*Photographs by Uwe Schneider*

*In the aftermath of the events of September 11, Oregon's economy has experienced a downturn, with some reports indicating that Oregon's unemployment rate is now second in the nation. Even before September 11, Oregon earned the dubious reputation of having the highest hunger rate in the nation. In a recent interview, Suzanne Feeney, Director of the Institute for Nonprofit Management and Associate Professor of Public Administration at Portland State University, spoke with Rachel Bristol, Executive Director of The Oregon Food Bank, to get her views about the struggle to feed the hungry.*

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about the Oregon Food Bank – what it does, and who it serves?

A: Oregon Food Bank is a private non-profit organization. We link to 20 regional food banks around the state. Two of them are directly operated by Oregon Food Bank. The other 18 are independent organizations. We call them regional coordinating agencies or regional food banks. Here in the Portland metropolitan area, we distribute food to about 280 non-profit organizations throughout Multnomah, Clackamas, Clark, and Washington Counties. We deliver food to the other regional food banks and, through them, the total number of agencies that access food through our network is now about 780. Our mission is to eliminate hunger and its root causes because no one should be hungry. We approach that goal in the immediate term through collection and distribution of large volumes of food. About 25 million pounds of food go through our warehouses to agencies throughout the state. We also try to get at the underlying causes of hunger through the efforts of an advisory board and a three-person advocacy staff that works both administratively and legislatively at state, local, and federal levels to seek improvements in programs that were originally designed to be the real safety net for low income people.

Q: Given that you're statewide, and that the Oregon Food Bank is the only food bank in the country to serve the entire state, you have your finger on Oregon's pulse with regard to the increasing demand for food as well as the flow of donations to support the fight against hunger. What does the profile of hunger look like in Oregon?

A: About 41% of the people who eat out of an emergency food box at least once during the year are kids under the age of 18. We see many two-parent families. Over the years we've seen some real growth in the number of working poor and have actually worked with our network to design programs that specifically target that population. Most of the emergency food box agencies are only open a few hours, maybe once or twice a week, and it can be very hard for a working person to access services. Looking at the adult population, the total served in our most recent fiscal year is estimated at 652,000 individuals.

Q: Throughout the state?

A: Throughout Oregon and Clark County, Washington. The adult population is working, disabled, taking care of someone who is disabled, retired, or looking for work. People are doing what our society says they're supposed to be doing, but they're simply not making ends meet. That figure is particularly disturbing because it implies that the kids of these adults are going without adequate nutrition. We know that this has an impact on their ability to learn in school, their attendance, and their attention. That's another issue that we try to work on both nationally and locally.

Q: You have indicated that the number of working poor has increased in the last five years. What's happened with the population of children, the under 18 group? Has that population increased substantially?

A: As a percentage of the total, it has stayed about the same.

Q: Has the total rate of hunger in Oregon increased in the last five years?

A: If you measure by emergency food boxes, yes, it's up about 30% in the last five years. We are seeing another surge of requests in the first quarter of this fiscal year. All of the people who were laid off at the first of the year have run out of unemployment benefits and have depleted whatever reserves remained. Those folks are now beginning to show up at the food pantries, and we are seeing some very significant increases. Comparing the July through September quarter for Washington County, which has remained relatively flat while other areas grew more rapidly in recent years, the year 2001 numbers are up 45%. Part of what we are seeing is the impact of the housing market. Particularly in the Portland area, the cost of housing is eating people up. Of course, we're seeing increases elsewhere – in utility rates, childcare. Decent childcare is quite expensive. There are a lot of pressures on limited household budgets. That is why we work hard on issues like access to food stamps, which are intended to be a safety net. Unfortunately, the system has made accessing food stamps harder.

We've been conducting a study called the Hundred Factors Assessment. We have done it every two years since 1986. At first we saw that a lot of people who were eligible for food stamps were not accessing food stamps. We worked very hard on that over the years, and in the early 90's we were really beginning to make ground so that more people were able to use food stamps before they had to come to an emergency food box agency. Even so, people were running out of their food stamps before the end of the month. That was before the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996, what we all know as welfare reform. What many people don't know is that the major financial savings to the federal government in that Act came at the expense of making people ineligible for food stamps. What it means here in Oregon is the loss of 46 million dollars a year in food buying power for low-income people, and, of course, it means 46 million fewer dollars being spent in our grocery stores as well.

Q: Your description of the devolution of welfare reform can account for the trend toward increased hunger. But why is Oregon's hunger rate considered number one in the nation? How did we get that kind of reputation?

A: You know, that surprises a lot of people. I think there are a number of factors. Certainly, a population influx has put more pressure on the housing markets.



Rachel Bristol



Suzanne Feeney

## OTHER METRO AREA PROGRAMS FEED THE HUNGRY: TWO EXAMPLES



Photograph by Craig Wollner

Friday Feeds dinner at Grace Memorial Episcopal Church.

### THE FRIDAY FEEDS PROGRAM

The Friday Feeds program of Grace Memorial Episcopal Church offers weekly meals to the hungry—some are homeless, some are cold or lonely, some are elderly and isolated and some are at the end of their available finances. The program serves about 50-70 people each meal.

The program originated with several Grace parishioners who desired to be directly involved with helping others in one of life's most basic and meaningful ways. Today, it is a partnership with Westminster Presbyterian Church. For more information, call 503/287-0418 or visit Grace Memorial Episcopal Church at 1535 N.E. 17th Avenue.



Long time volunteer Mary McGregor delivers meals.

### LOAVES & FISHES DELIVERS MORE THAN A MEAL

Luella is seventy-one and copes with the challenges of arthritis, fibromyalgia and a rare form of diabetes. She says, "I'm so thankful I can stay in my house because that's where I want to be. If it wasn't for Meals-on-Wheels, I don't see how I could. I didn't opt for Meals-on-Wheels at first - I thought, 'You can always put a TV dinner in.' But I didn't and I got sick a lot and was weaker. That's changed since getting Meals-on-Wheels. I'm getting more vegetables and more company. The volunteers who deliver my meals are truly wonderful."

Loaves & Fishes, The Meals-On-Wheels People, provides more than a meal to seniors like Luella. With the help of 5,000 volunteers, the agency prepares 4,000 meals for seniors every day in the Portland metro area. Dedicated volunteers deliver Meals-on-Wheels to elderly people who are homebound. For many, their volunteer drivers are the only people they see all day. At sixteen Loaves & Fishes centers, volunteers also serve lunch to seniors who share a hot meal with friends. For more information about Loaves & Fishes, call 503/736-6325 or visit online at: [www.loavesandfishesonline.com](http://www.loavesandfishesonline.com). *Photograph courtesy of Loaves & Fishes*

An enormous increase in housing cost has been a very significant factor. We also have seen a change in the types of jobs available in the state. For most of our history, logging, wood products industries, and manufacturing offered well-paying jobs with good benefits. What folks call blue-collar jobs. They didn't require a lot of higher education. Since the early 80's, many of those jobs have been going away, replaced by two key industries: computers and tourism. But we actually import people to work in the computer industry because we don't have enough trained people here in the state. And tourism typically is seasonal, pays minimum wage, and doesn't offer significant benefits. Oregon primarily is a rural state with towns of small populations. Residents have lost their mill jobs. They need their rig to make it into town if they are even going to apply for benefits, but their rig disqualifies them from getting help. Many people are in a real Catch-22.

As the director of the Food Bank, I don't want to cast any aspersions at our network. The strength of Oregon's volunteer network rests partially on the fact that we are an agricultural state and have been able to build a much stronger charitable network to be the safety net below the safety net. I think that in better times, during the boom years, it was really hard for people to accept that not everybody was being affected equally. A lot of people lost a lot of ground. That in turn impacts some of our public policy.

Washington State did two things after the Personal Responsibility Act, or welfare reform. First, they paid out state funds for food stamps to continue to go to populations that otherwise were ineligible. Second, they appropriated nine million dollars per biennium to support the emergency food system. In contrast, Oregon appropriates \$750,000 per biennium to help the emergency food network. So state by state, real differences exist in the support for nutrition programs.

Q: We have just completed the 10-year census. We know that the numbers of both ethnic and cultural groups coming into Oregon have increased significantly. What has been the effect on the profile of hunger in Oregon?

A: We do continue to see African-Americans and Hispanics disproportionately represented in the numbers. What you can't pull out of the numbers is some of the Eastern European influx into the area. One of the things we see are cultural differences. Some Asians and Pacific Islanders typically don't access our system, whereas we have had a huge influx of people from the former Soviet

Union. Our agencies also are struggling with the language barriers. We put a fair amount of energy into doing outreach to minority and immigrant populations when the welfare reform legislation went into effect and developed new networks to help people. We do continue to struggle with the language barriers because people fear that they will be designated as a public charge if they apply for assistance. So even people who are eligible sometimes don't apply for food stamps or other benefits because they are afraid they'll be deported.

Q: Can you tell me off-hand how many people are

Q: Where do you get your food?

A: Most of it comes from the food industry. We have seen some major shifts. One of the changes we are facing reflects what is happening in agriculture, retail, and processing. We have lost many large donors that used to be in the state through mergers and acquisitions. Distribution warehouses have been moved out of the area to other areas. The closure of AgriPak, which was bought out by one of the banana companies, created a 70% increase in the number of people coming for emergency food in the Woodburn area. They renamed it AgriFrozen and



Hot lunches, fellowship, classes, and activities attract seniors to Loaves & Fishes centers.

served through Food Bank distributions and the value of the food that you distribute in a year?

A: As I mentioned, an estimated 652,000 individuals ate out of an emergency food box at least once in our last fiscal year. On average the same household receives a food box three to four times a year. So there is simply no way that anybody could be living off the system. The resources just aren't there. Agencies in the network reported serving up 3.7 million emergency meals at soup kitchens, shelters for battered women and children, and similar programs. In terms of the food, network-wide we moved 46 million pounds of food last year. About 25 million of that went physically through our Portland area warehouses. It has a wholesale value of approximately \$36 million.

closed the doors this spring. For the last 10 years that company alone has been donating between 700,000 and one million pounds of frozen bulk vegetables.

Farmers don't have a place to take their crops. More and more food farmers are selling their land, which is being replaced with nursery stock. We have seen some real shifts in food production here in Oregon. We are part of a national network of food banks, which means we have passed all the standards for record keeping, food handling, safety, and sanitation, so major industries have confidence that when they donate to us, the products are going to be used properly. Being part of that network, we are able to bring in some food in from other states. We share surpluses from Oregon like millions of pounds of potatoes and corn on the cob, and in return other states share with us. We get a lot of



apples and carrots out of Eastern Washington in return for our cauliflower and green beans.

Of course, these relationships give us increased visibility. A marketing firm donated a survey a few years ago to see if people had heard of the Oregon Food Bank. We had a very high recognition rate, nearly 90%. We have name recognition because we service 600 food drives between October and December. While food drives have become a growing part of what we distribute, they are by no means the largest. Food drives represent about 15% of the product we distribute. We purchase about 5% of the food. That's been a growing phenomenon. Not rapidly growing, because the resources aren't there.

The final source is the federal government. Most people remember Ronald Reagan announcing his gift to the poor at Christmas in 1982. I'm sure he



**Rachel Bristol, Oregon Food Bank.**

meant everything he said, but it was also about depleting surpluses that were stored in warehouses, billions and billions of dollars worth of surplus commodity that had built up as result of foreign pricing subsidies. We had just formed the statewide network when that program came into being. In those early days, you would get a phone call. "Okay, you're getting 11 trucks of cheese, where do you want them?" The process served as a catalyst for developing the volunteers and the whole distribution system, which is now known as the Oregon Food Bank network. That program peaked in 1988. We moved 20 million pounds of food, and 75% of that, 15 million pounds, was USDA commodities, which came in nice neat packages. The program then declined. The dairy farmers got bought out. The cows got killed. There were no longer surpluses. So the program became a purchase program through the Farm Bill in 1990 and has been renewed every five years since then. The program dropped to an all time low in 1996-

1997. We moved about 22 million pounds of food and 2 million, or less than 10%, was USDA commodities. So we have had to get creative and flexible over the years in terms of broadening our base for food. Ironically, as we currently are losing major donors, major food companies within the state, Congress is building up more farm price supports, and we are beginning to see a rapid increase in USDA commodities again for the first time in more than a decade. Current fiscal year projections suggest that we may be offered as much as 13 million pounds of USDA commodities, which will, frankly, be a life saver given the anticipated need.

**Q:** Do you have estimates about what your donor base looks like both in terms of size and the amount of giving?

**A:** A little more than 20,000 individuals give to the Food Bank each year. Individuals make up about half of our annual revenue. More than 80% comes from private giving through events. A lot of people don't know that the Waterfront Blues Festival is a Food Bank event. To date, it has been our only fundraising event, and it raises about 8% of our annual operating revenue. Various and sundry other events primarily raise food contributions.

**Q:** If 80% is private giving through events and that sort of thing, where is the other 20% of your donations coming from?

**A:** About 12% are agency contributions, something that in Food Banking is known as Shared Maintenance Contributions. Here in Oregon, Food Banking was started by some of the local direct service providers that have been around forever, like Union Gospel Mission, Salvation Army, and St. Vincent De Paul. In fact, we got started at about the same time. Food Banking got started in Arizona and went on to become the national network of Food Banks. Agencies came together and, in those days, frankly it was as much about preventing food waste from going into a landfill as it was about defeating hunger. These agencies recognized that they were all calling on the same stores. Everybody was going to Nabisco. A single agency might have needed five cases a week, but Nabisco had three semi loads they wanted to move. So they said if we all put in a little something per pound of food that would then support an organization that could handle the large volumes, we'd keep a lot more food out of the land fills, we'd enable a lot more non-profit agencies to stretch their budgets by accessing the food. That's really how food banking got started here and in the country.

So in the early days, 90% of the operating costs came from share contribution. Today, share contribution makes up about 12% of our operating budget. In recognizing that there has been a burgeoning need over the last five years, our goal has been to increase the volume of food available to agencies without increasing their contribution as a share of our total budget. So share contributions have declined both in percentage and in real terms over the years. The final category includes government grants, which primarily consist of the USDA reimbursement funds that go with The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). TEFAP was started out of Ronald Reagan's free cheese program. Half of these funds gets passed through to the regional food banks, and the other half goes to offset some of our expenses in distributing the commodities statewide.

Q: One of our national charities, the Red Cross, has come under fire and lost its Executive Director because some of the donations since September 11 were not going to the victims of the tragedy. I'm wondering if you have experienced increased scrutiny or questions.

A: I would say that I have not seen or heard of a heightened level of questions coming in from donors. That may be partly because we have a policy of being an open book. Donors have access to our 9-90's and copies of our annual report. We talk to our donors. A donor may say, "I want to buy rice to serve Hispanics in Ontario." We'll do that. But we might also tell the donor that we have a lot of rice from another source that can cover the need, so that her dollars can be redirected to address related problems. We can turn \$10,000 into \$100,000 worth of food. So we believe it is important to give donors a choice and then to educate them about how we do use our dollars and how we can leverage those dollars to create something that's larger than individuals could do by themselves.

Q: Explain a little bit about how \$10,000 becomes \$100,000 worth of food.

A: Our operating budget is \$4 million dollars a year. Our total audited budget is a little over \$36 million. For every dollar, we distribute \$10 worth of food based on the poundage and its wholesale value. The bulk of the food is coming from the food industry. We are still keeping it out of the landfills. KP&G Marwick does a study each year that looks at the make-up of the inventory and calculates the wholesale value of the food, so it is a very conservative number. We are able to translate

that. We know we have 25 million pounds of food. We know the average wholesale cost per pound. Then we can tell the Governor that for every dollar we spent, we have this many dollars worth of food going out.

Q: Have you noticed any changes in donation patterns to the Food Bank since September 11th?

A: We have. We're definitely not playing Chicken Little at this point because it still is too early to tell. We never know until sometime in January where we stand. We have seen a significant drop in the response rate to some of our fall mailings. Our Fall newsletter went out in September. Like many other non-profits, we are looking to the October through December 8th time period to raise as much as half of our revenue. We projected that it would be a relatively flat year because of what we were seeing in the economy. And we have just completed an \$11.5 million capital campaign to build a permanent home. Change is most evident in one organization that has always done gangbusters in accruing donors. It's not doing anything at all this year.

Q: Is it your sense that the New York tragedy had anything to do with that response?

A: I think that the tragedy probably did have a little to do with it. I think that the economy has had a bigger impact than have dollars going to New York City as opposed to hunger initiatives here. A group that formed about five years ago called Oregon Wins Against Hunger launched their fifth annual fundraising drive on September 24. They were worried that they weren't going to meet their \$80,000 goal. People were hearing about layoffs day by day. More and more people know someone who has been impacted by the downturn in the economy. Even so, Oregon Wins Against Hunger raised \$91,000. Hopefully things balance out. In my experiences, you lose one thing, and another door opens.

Q: There has been speculation that people aren't digging deeper, they are just sending their money other places. One outcome of the tragedy is that charities and people who work with charities are on the front page. Do you see this as a good advertisement for support of charities, considering the fact that money might be diverted? Would you say that there is a greater response to the work that charities are doing for society?

A: I don't think anybody really knows. At least, we don't have a concrete answer yet. We have seen a

decline in some areas of funding. We believe it has more to do with a slowing economy than it does to diversion of charitable gifts to the September 11 fund. People's sensitivity to the work that non-profit organizations do has been heightened, and in turn people are asking the right kind of questions so that they can put their money where it is going to be best used, or used in the way that they intend it to be used. I think, I hope, that the events of September 11 created more of a sense of community and compassion. That's my greatest hope. People who never take the time to think about the suffering of others may be slowing down and giving more thought to what's important and to new elements of their community.

Q: Many people think about charitable donations in terms of cash or in-kind gifts, equipment or services. I think another kind of giving is volunteerism. Have you noticed an increase in requests to volunteer for the food bank, not only in the local metropolitan region, but throughout the state?



A: There have been some increases, partly because people have a need to do something, and partly because of the holiday season. It is hard to discern why, but the number of volunteers is up 10%. One reason is that corporations are urging their employees to volunteer. For instance, Tektronix recently told their people, don't come in, go to Oregon Food Bank. In the space of a week, 300 Tektronix employees volunteered. That helped. Nike was already doing that before September 11, and Intel highlighted Oregon Food Bank as part of its United Way campaign. Corporations want to have the reputation of being good corporate citizens, part of the community, and I think that they are listening to their employees about how to support the community. Years ago in Portland corporations provided volunteers through the administration of a Volunteer Council. That fell off the map because of changes in the food industry, mergers, and losses of industry to other states. The return of corporate volunteerism is a real shift. It's one of the developments we've seen over the last few years or so as utilities and food industries have moved outside of Oregon.

Q: You mentioned your recent capital campaign. How has that affected the Food Bank?

A: Conducting the organization's first capital campaign has been a real learning experience for us.

The capital campaign is a springboard for building the base of support. We're seeing increased support from corporations wanting to work at partnerships because we got ourselves out there in front of people and proved that we handle contributions from the community responsibly and can run a very large organization efficiently. Our biggest challenge is going to be nurturing those new relationships. We have worked hard to put as many legs on the funding stool as possible so that if one goes away, we remain stable. We reflect the national averages in terms of actual corporate and foundation gifts, which are only about 5% of our operating budget. We don't go to the big foundations that often. The growth area for us is in planned giving. Building the new facility will help us deepen our relationship with our donors. It's a cause that gets people to come out. Even people who have supported us for 15 years say, "Wow! I had no idea." This is a big operation, and they're only seeing a third of it under current circumstances.

Q: If I as a donor want to write a check for \$500 dollars for a charity for this tax year, why should I write a check to Oregon Food Bank instead of Snowcap, Loaves & Fishes, or some other organization which deal directly with the beneficiary of the food? Are you in competition with those other organizations?

A: We work very hard not to be. Our message to the donor is that we don't really care if you contribute to us, or Loaves & Fishes, or Fish Emergency Service. Here's the role we play, here's the role they play. What we value is that you're supporting this work. Our goal is to educate donors about what we do and what our network does and to encourage them to support the cause in whatever way is best for them.

Q: Finally, can you summarize your thoughts about hunger in Oregon, and what more needs to be done?

A: We are not turning things around in terms of hunger in Oregon. Our network is needed more than ever. We need the support of the community at all levels, whether it is a food pantry in Ontario, one in downtown Portland, or the Oregon Food Bank. As a network of agencies, we also need to look at where we can combine our resources to be stronger and more cost effective, and to be more accommodating in terms of volunteers. I do think the ground swell of volunteerism shows that people have an increased sense of being a part of the community and want to make a statement through their actions. ■