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Stepping Up to the Issue of Hunger through Partnerships

Issue: Food is a basic need, particularly for children who need healthy nourishment for their brains and bodies to develop their full potential. However, in Iowa, for 17% of children and 12% of adults, food insecurity is a day-to-day problem. Recent local research found that in Polk County 27,000 people, including nearly 13,000 children, face the prospect of not having enough to eat. These include children, seniors, and hardworking families.

Taking Action: Recognizing the issue, the Polk County Board of Supervisors/Board of Health (BOS/BOH), with the support of the Polk County Health Department, initiated the Partnership for a Hunger-Free Polk County in 2014 to address this problem. Local food assistance providers and experts convened to identify gaps in the current food pantry network research. Focus groups identified existing services and weaknesses, and mapping identified areas of need (i.e., areas of the metro where

a high density of low-income families live overlaid with data on existing assistance). Based on the research, the partnership created a plan to fill these gaps at an estimated cost of \$10 million. The BOS/BOH committed to raising those funds as well as \$1.25 million to the effort. To date, over \$5.3 million has been raised, and planning is underway for the next area of work with a focus on community hot meal sites and food delivery to the home-bound.

Funds raised are being used to expand access to food pantries. Six partner pantries have expanded their hours to include evening and weekends, allowing working families to better access the help they need. A mobile food



pantry now makes regular visits to 13 neighborhoods throughout the metro. St. Vincent De Paul has opened a new pantry and human services campus on Army Post Road, an area identified as having a high need but low access. A warehouse was renovated to allow food pantries to order larger quantities of food at lower prices and to assist small non-profits with storing large food donations. One of the key focuses of this work is improving access to quality nutrition. Hunger Free Polk County is working with the Des Moines Area Religious Council to ensure that as much healthy food as possible is being used at all of the various distribution points.

Impact: Because of public health leadership of this partnership, over 300 hours of access were added to the food pantry network per week. This effort has leveraged resources and increased capacity to areas of greatest need. For more information about the strategy, visit:

<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20160920.056692/full/>



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*Healthy kids are better prepared to learn.
A healthy workforce is more productive.
Healthy communities thrive.*