

Feeding the Hungry: Why Volunteering is Crucial

By Preston Saunders



Food insecurity is one of the foremost struggles of homeless and impoverished populations. Despite the increase in physical locations of food pantries, soup kitchens, and other distribution centers, it is still difficult to provide full daily meals for the homeless due to lack of food availability. This, coupled with the issues of insufficient nutrition and lack of manpower because of inability to compensate workers, creates a large demand for volunteers that is very rarely met.

Social institutions are the main provider of food for homeless individuals in the United States. However, meals provided by food kitchens are typically small and low in nutritional value. Because of low government funding for public soup kitchens, as well as no national standards to set food pyramid guidelines, it is difficult to promote healthy eating. The contributions many shelters receive are from local restaurants, who donate leftover carbohydrate-based foods like breads, pastas, and rice, as well as food that is high in sodium and sugar. The average budget per meal is around \$1.50 or less. Increasing the amount of fresh, dependable food available could have a hand in greatly improving the health and energy level of

homeless people eating at these places, as they tend to suffer from food-related health problems like obesity. Volunteers or people that can donate fresh food are badly needed, and influencing lawmakers in local government to grant funding to soup kitchens is a great step.

The problem, however, is the low number of volunteers to help unload, prepare food, and clean up the facilities. Feeding a hundred people per day is no simple task, and requires much legwork. Soup kitchens have historically been non-profit, and thus require volunteer labor. Many working people cannot find time to do so unpaid or do not have the energy with a full-time job. Therefore, it is difficult to find people skilled in food preparation that can spare more than a few hours each week. Religious groups and labor organizations are the most engaged in volunteer work, encouraging their members to help out in their communities. Thus, the greatest influx of helpers occurs around specific religious holidays, including Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Although well-intentioned, in the long run, this is called episodic volunteering and lacks any regular meal stability, which is what soup kitchens and other non-profits are hoping to provide. Volunteering is most effective when done over a period of time, just as soup kitchens are made to provide meals to people over time. Meal service functions with short-term volunteers, but it becomes difficult to execute long-term improvement projects when regular team members are few and far between.

It is important to note the wide range of people that depend on soup kitchens and food pantries to sustain themselves. On average, less than half of attendees looking for a meal are homeless in the traditional sense. Many have subsidized or government housing, but live far below the poverty line. A few are students or expecting mothers who are unable to work. Even something as simple as not owning a refrigerator causes people to seek out soup kitchens.

Nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ are dependent on government food programs, like reduced school lunches, and food stamps. In addition, the community that a soup kitchen provides, as well as the support from staff and fellow soup kitchen regulars, is cited by many as the second or third most popular reason for attending.

By committing to being a regular volunteer, concerns about hunger and health can be

alleviated among poorer communities. It would be so much more rewarding for all parties if the urge to help others became not just holiday spirit, but a year-round venture.

References

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