

# When the Cupboard is Always Bare

By Heather Stergos



Many of us use phrases such as “haven’t eaten in days” or “starving to death” to express a feeling of extreme hunger that is easily satisfied by a short walk to the refrigerator, a drive to the local fast food establishment, or heating something in the microwave. We use those phrases, but how often do we consider, truly, what that kind of hunger actually means?

For those who are homeless, “starving to death” and “haven’t eaten for days” are not merely expressions but are often part of the daily context of their existence. For these individuals, feeding an empty stomach is not as simple as a walk to the refrigerator. Many of us will never know what it feels like to try to sleep with a starving stomach, or how to get up and walk for miles when your body has no fuel to run on. We simply get up, walk a few feet, eat and then life continues.

This is not the experience for the homeless population. These individuals face every day not sure of whether they will be able to put food in their stomach or the stomachs of those they love. With no money to buy food, no permanent location and no equipment to cook with, they are reduced with searching through dumpsters, asking for handouts or when fortunate, getting something to eat at a shelter. The thought is often that because homeless shelters and soup kitchens provide food, this food is meeting the nutritional needs of the population. The reality is that shelters and kitchens are dependent in large part upon donations and the sadly slim budget for food provided by grants or other forms of funding. Though they try to the best of their ability, many shelters and kitchens are not able to supply food that is nutritionally sound, with most of what is served being high fat, low fiber and inadequate in terms of vitamins and minerals. Recent research has shown that homeless preschool children receive 66% of the needed foods and grains to meet their daily requirement, 25% of the needed daily recommendation for vegetables and the bare minimum of nutritional needs from meat and fruit. Homeless shelters typically cannot afford to buy fresh fruit so most of what is consumed is canned in heavy syrup. Homeless children who receive meals in shelters consume two to three times the amount of

sugars and fats recommended daily. Children who are homeless are at greater risk for iron deficiency anemia than low-income housed children, even when both groups are receiving WIC benefits. Homeless shelters provide a necessary and important service by supplying the only source of food that many individuals receive, but they are limited by donations and the funding they receive.

Malnutrition plagues the homeless, adding to health issues, compromised further by substance abuse and mental health issues and effectively making the daily quest for survival that much more difficult. As members of the community we can assist in this struggle by providing healthy donations to local shelters and by supporting funding to homeless programs.