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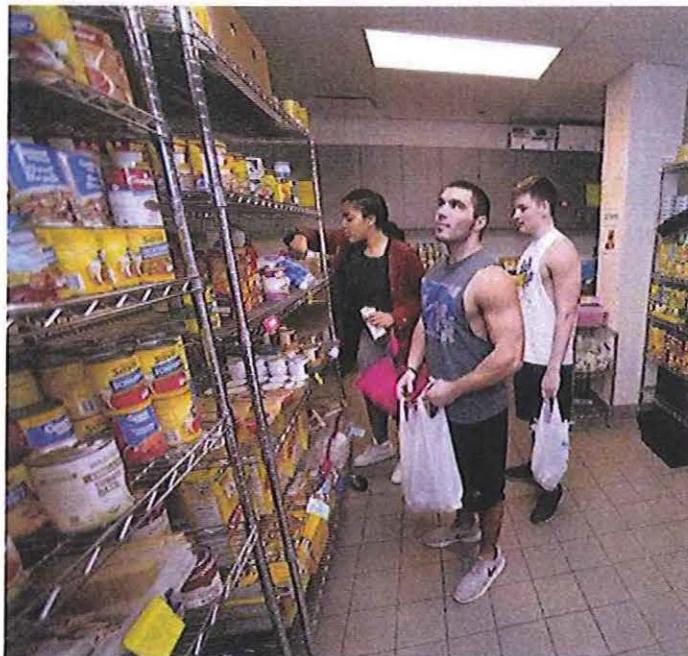
As poverty and hunger grow in Warrensburg, agencies try a new approach

HIGHLIGHTS

Basic needs for the poor run high in Johnson County, Mo.

Community leaders realized they had to work together to help more people

Today, families see benefits of more coordinated efforts by agencies, church groups and others



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University of Central Missouri students, Dylan Skeens (center) a sophomore from Montgomery City, Mo., Zac Leonard (right) a sophomore from Montgomery City, Mo., and Talayah Rich a junior from Minneapolis, Minn., all take time to decide on the right choices for the 10 items they can take from the Campus Cupboard food pantry. Over 300 students take part in the program. "I love the pantry" said Skeens. "It is awesome and it saves me," said Leonard. Joe Ledford - jledford@kcstar.com

BY LAURA BAUER
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WARRENSBURG, MO. — The simple, round tables in the church dining room are set with silverware and paper napkins, and the cups are ready to be filled with water and iced tea.

When Amanda Summitt has enough gas money for her 1984 Cadillac, she comes into town with her daughter, MadaLynn, for dinner here at Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church.


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All around them are other people stuck in a similar economic struggle. Too often there's not enough money for food. Some are homeless, or feel as if they're just a paycheck or two away. The dinner at the church, sponsored by a community nonprofit, gives relief.

"Things are kind of rough right now," said Summitt, 32, who scrapes by on food stamps and other government assistance while she continues a four-year wait on a disability claim. "Sometimes it's embarrassing to have to come here, but I thank them for what they are doing."

Many in and around Warrensburg find themselves where Summitt is: living in poverty and relying on the community to help when they're unable to pay the bills plus buy food.

 One-fourth of the city of nearly 20,000 lives below the poverty level. A recent study by Feeding America showed that Johnson County — of which Warrensburg is the county seat — is among the worst for food insecurity in Harvesters' 26-county service area in northwest Missouri and northeast Kansas. Even some college students in Warrensburg worry about where their next meal is coming from.

As the needs grow, some leaders in the city and county have found a way to come together as few others in Missouri have. They've discovered a collective way to help their residents.

Organizations, social service agencies and church groups used to do their own thing to help those with the greatest need. Too often, they duplicated services. Other times, because there was no accounting for what any one group was doing, families in need could fall through the cracks.

"The greatest concern wasn't the needs of the community," said Bob Vickers, who has lived in Warrensburg for nearly two decades. "The greatest concern was the agencies weren't working together."

Vickers and others, including the Rev. Terrence Moody of Shiloh Missionary Baptist and representatives from the school district and the University of Central Missouri, wanted to change that. They joined forces and curbed the doubling-up of services. They made sure each agency and group covered a specific need, whether it's helping with housing, household supplies or food for school or university students.

And if someone needs help outside their area, they can point residents to those who provide that service.

If it's an elementary or middle school student, people know they can call Liz Kostas or Doug Conley. For a hungry student at the university, it's Beth Rutt. When a family struggles to pay for food or requires other help, Moody knows what to do.

And when a social service agency needs a bed or clothes for a client, they go to Vickers, who in 2012 became the executive director of the Johnson County United Way.

They've all worked to make sure every pocket of need is addressed by some organization, agency or community leader, and there are plans to do even more.

Residents like Christina Scribner, 28, can feel the coordination. She works, but her boyfriend is disabled. They've got the bills covered but often need help with meals to feed three sons when the food stamps run out.

"We buy what we can," Scribner said. "But it doesn't always cover it with a large group of people."

So toward the end of the month, she and her family often go to Shiloh, where everyone is treated as a guest and no one pays a dime. They also don't wait in a line, or hold out a plate for food dished out by a giant spoon. They are served by volunteers who talk with them and often know them by name.

Scribner feels this type of caring across the community now.

"In Warrensburg, if there's a problem, it's solved immediately," she said as she helped one son manage his chili dog inside Shiloh Baptist. "I feel like everyone works as a team."



Warrensburg fights poverty and hunger together

As needs grew in their Missouri community, many organizations started working together to serve more people.

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'A lot of need'

Clusters of businesses line the main streets of Warrensburg. The University of Central Missouri campus is a major employer, and so is Whiteman Air Force Base outside nearby Knob Noster.

"It looks like a thriving community," said Conley, student services coordinator at Warrensburg Middle School. "But it can be deceptive. There is a lot of need."

In the past few years, homeless numbers have continued to climb. Community leaders estimate that roughly 120 people are homeless, living under bridges or in cars. Sometimes homeless people pitch tents at a state park or not far from the Wal-Mart.

Another 1,500 people are considered "sheltered" homeless, doubling up with a neighbor, friend or relative.

"People often come here for hope," Vickers said. "They think, 'If I come to Warrensburg and get a degree, my life will change.'"



In the school district, the number of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches has jumped from about 20 percent 10 years ago to nearly 50 percent. Kostas, a social worker at Ridge View Elementary, sees how some kids rely on BackSnacks from Harvesters to get them through a weekend.

And Conley, who has learned to work grocery ads and sales to get the most out of a dollar, makes sure middle schoolers also have weekend food.

"Kids can't learn if they're not warm, not fed," said Scott Patrick, Warrensburg's school superintendent. "We have to make sure those kids are receiving as much help as we can give them."

Some residents have lost their jobs; others have gone through divorces and can't pay all their bills. Many rely on food distribution provided by Manna Harvest — a community nonprofit founded by Moody several years ago — and the city's pantry, both agencies of the Harvesters food bank in Kansas City.



"We have single parents going back to school and taking care of their kids and just trying to make ends meet," said Carole Smith, director of The Food Center pantry, which serves 400 to 450 families each month. "A lot of our people are working, but working minimum-wage jobs. By the time they pay the rent and utilities and try to get insurance, there's not a lot of money."

When groups weren't working together, they struggled to help families. Too many people weren't sure whom to call when a need came up.

After the collaboration began, members started an annual day of service, Project Community Connect. People without insurance can have a problem tooth pulled, get a flu shot or have their eyes checked. Stylists provide free haircuts, and agencies help people fill out paperwork to get a birth certificate and sign up for services they are qualified to receive.

At the fourth annual event last month, more than 500 people received services.

"It really takes a community willing to be solution-minded," said Moody, a Kansas Citian who travels to Warrensburg six days a week to lead Shiloh Missionary Baptist as its senior pastor.

"Someone has to lead them and share a vision and then they have to get that vision."



UCM opens food pantry

After seeing a need, the University of Central Missouri opened a food pantry for students and staff two years ago.

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He and Vickers say they know the community has gotten many people off the streets and into homes.

"But we also know we are helping people before it gets to that point," Vickers said. "My goal is to break the cycle of poverty. And we have to do it together."

College kids

The call came into Rutt's university office two years ago from a worker at the college health center.

Rutt, the director of student activities at the University of Central Missouri, often received calls for help, like the one about a student living out of his car.

This call, about a young man doing an internship, was even more dire.

"He hasn't eaten in three days," the health center staffer told Rutt. He was sick. He didn't know where to go.

"Pride is a terrible enemy in these situations," Rutt said. "We definitely have students that are not getting some financial support that allows them to have food on the table at times."

That's why the Campus Cupboard, a food pantry for students and staff, opened two years ago. No one has to show their need. They only have to show that they are members of the University of Central Missouri community.

"It takes a lot just to walk to the door and say, 'I need help,'" Rutt said. "Why put up any more barriers?"

Today, many students know where to go.

Three days a week the Campus Cupboard is open in the basement of the student wellness and health center. Food — everything from soup and canned vegetables to flour and cereal — fills five sets of shelves. Students can take 10 items per week.

"I don't have to worry about food or going hungry," said Drashan Shetty, 25, a graduate student from India who relies on the pantry. "It helps with expenses a lot. It's one less thing to think about. Food is taken care of."

Word is still getting out about the pantry, said Talayah Rich, a junior from Minneapolis. She's a regular.

"School gets expensive," Rich said. "I know that some days I'm not able to get the food that I need, so if I come here once a week I know that I have a stable meal at least a couple days out of a week."

The pantry opened in October 2013, and 76 people used it that month. One year later, that number had doubled.

Last month, two years after the Campus Cupboard opened, 238 people used the pantry.

After Rutt got the call that day about the sick intern, she showed up where the young man was working with a box of food.

Rutt tells her students and others that sometimes people need a little help, and that's OK.

Less than two months after the intern had completed his internship, she got a note from him. With a check.

"I'm sure other people need it also," he wrote.

Rutt said she spent "a good five minutes" with tears in her eyes. "He got it," she said. "It really was a hand up."



Evening meals in Warrensburg

One pastor wanted to provide a meal for the homeless and those in need where they could sit around the table at night and be served.

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Building people up

Moody grew up in Chicago, in a middle-class family where the dinner table was the place to sort out problems and share ideas. He thought that if he and his church could do that for people in need, it would help lift them up.

Plus, he and others at the church could form relationships and get to know their stories and discover what more they could do to help.

So in 2008, after he left behind a 25-year career at Sprint to become a full-time pastor at Shiloh Missionary Baptist, he went to work creating that service. The church would serve a meal to the homeless and others in need once a week.

He remembers the night of that first dinner. Seventy-five volunteers showed up and there was enough spaghetti to serve 200. He remembers thinking: *I hope we don't have to turn people away.*

Two people showed up.

Seven years later, he can admit that he was discouraged that first night. But he and others had faith that an evening meal where people in need would come and be served eventually would lift the community.

A year later, Manna Harvest added another night. The next year, another. Once it got to three nights a week, Moody could see change happening.

"Our whole focus is to restore their dignity and allow them to come together as a family and figure things out, where they're not looked down upon," Moody said. "Where they're not standing in a line. We hope it's helping them understand they are important and important to the community."

He measures success when people who receive services then go out and serve others.

The number of volunteers only grows. Members from churches and businesses volunteer at Manna Harvest, as well as groups from the school district, the university, the Rotary Club and Whiteman.

"At first I was calling for volunteers," said Shirley Briscoe, volunteer coordinator for Manna Harvest. "Now people call me wanting to volunteer."

Each volunteer knows the importance of making eye contact with people, extending a hand to shake or just asking people how their day has gone.

By 6 on a recent evening inside the church's dining room, Summitt and her daughter were ready to head home. They'd filled up on chicken alfredo and garlic bread, and 7-year-old MadaLynn had dessert.

But before they got up from the table, volunteer Sue Boland headed their way, just to chat. She wanted to make sure MadaLynn liked the blue velvet cake.

"I see you did," Boland said, looking down at the empty bowl and a bit of icing on MadaLynn's face.

With Christmas coming, and two kids' birthdays in the coming weeks along with all the regular bills, Summitt said she's feeling the pressure of providing for her family. Having a hot meal she can count on sometimes gets her through.

"There have been times I haven't eaten to make sure she has food," Summitt said, tears in her eyes. "And there are months I skip going to the food pantry because I know other people need it."

That night, as she and her daughter were eating dinner around the white table inside Shiloh Baptist, they talked about the next time they come for dinner. MadaLynn wants to volunteer and help serve other people. The two want to give back for all they've been given.

Another success in Moody's eyes.

HOW TO HELP

During the holidays, Harvesters continues to meet the needs of families and individuals in a 26-county area. Donations and help are always needed. To volunteer, go to www.harvesters.org or send donations to Harvesters at 3801 Topping Ave., Kansas City, MO 64129.

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