

Despite low poverty rates, food insecurity still exists in Fox Cities

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APPLETON - The long counters inside the St. Joseph Food Program are lined with groceries five days a week.

The doors open at 9 a.m. Monday to Friday, with food — fruits, vegetables, breads, meats and canned goods — available to anyone who qualifies for it. The organization gives out food to about 700 people a week, according to executive director Monica Clare.

The reasons those people show up each week tend to vary, Clare said. Many are disabled. Others are single parents. Some are simply out of work. All of them have had trouble covering the cost of food.

The organization began in 1982 in the basement of St. Joseph Parish, a Catholic church in downtown Appleton, but later moved to a building in Menasha. The need for their services hasn't ever gone away.

"We've tried to do what we can to bring light on the problem and let people know it happens here too," Clare said.

Poverty rates in Wisconsin are slightly lower than the U.S. average, but rates in the Fox Cities are even lower, according to the [United Way Fox Cities LIFE Study](#), which measures demographic, economic, social and health issues in the Fox Cities.

Winnebago County was at a 12.1 percent poverty rate in 2014, while Outagamie County was at 10 percent and Calumet County was at 5.9 percent. The federal poverty threshold that year was an annual income of \$24,008 or lower for a family of four.

But the study, typically updated every five years, found household income has grown slowly while rent has generally gone up in the region, which "suggests an increase in working poor who may be marginally above the poverty threshold but are susceptible to food insecurity."

The St. Joseph Food Program uses federal poverty guidelines to determine who qualifies for assistance, but can make adjustments based on specific circumstances, Clare said.

"If someone is over our income limits, we can still help them," she said.

The organization is supported largely by donations from local grocery stores, but still purchases a portion of the food given out to those in need. Trucks go out six days a week to collect donations.



Volunteer Robert Vollmer moves a pallet of donations last week at the St. Joseph Food Program in Menasha. Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin. (Photo: Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-W, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

But food insecurity isn't the only poverty-related issue that exists in the region. In late January, a count of homeless in the Fox Cities found 12 people sleeping outside, twice the number found in a count about a year earlier.

LEAVEN — or Limited Emergency Assistance Valley Ecumenical Network — provided emergency financial assistance to more than 6,300 households in the Fox Cities last year.

Mary Parsons, LEAVEN's executive director, said the organization provides financial assistance to people for a wide variety of reasons, but most often the issue has to do with the cost of housing or utilities.

"We're really helping to stabilize those struggling households that have nowhere else to turn for help," she said.

The organization has helped people experiencing homelessness, but has also assisted homeowners who needed help with a mortgage payment, Parsons said. Most of the financial assistance helps people escape otherwise precarious financial situations.

“We help ensure that people have their basic needs met,” she said.

LEAVEN looked at client information over a four-year time period and found three out of four of the people they served only used their services once or twice. That left a portion of people, often with chronic problems, who required more help, Parsons said.

The organization found many of their clients weren’t connecting with other resources in the community that would be able to help. In late November, LEAVEN broke ground on a building expansion to create space for partner organizations also able to help their clients.

Parsons said the expansion should make it easier for their clients to connect with other resources available in the community.

Clare, the food program’s director, said her organization also works closely with other groups in the community to help people in need.

“We’re one cog in the wheel,” Clare said.



Volunteer Bevy VanDaalwyk packs baked goods at the St. Joseph Food Program in Menasha. Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin. (Photo: Wm. Glasheen/USA TODAY NETWORK-W, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

Poverty rates in 2014

U.S.: 15.5 percent

Wisconsin: 13.2%

Winnebago: 12.1%

Outagamie: 10%

Calumet: 5.9%

Appleton: 11.7%

Menasha: 12.3%

Neenah: 10.6%

Oshkosh: 18.9 percent