

## The Wisconsin Food Security Consortium

### - An Overview -

Hunger is a real problem for Wisconsin families. Statewide, over half a million people live in households that are food insecure. That is - they do not have or are uncertain of having - enough food for an active, healthy life. This is 9% of our citizens, or 1 in every 11 households. Indications are that food insecurity is increasing in our state.

There have been many efforts to reduce hunger in Wisconsin. Private organizations have worked tirelessly to provide emergency food relief, largely through food pantries & meal sites. Public agencies and community organizations have increased utilization of food stamps, WIC, school meals & nutrition education, and have made internet-based access to health & nutrition programs a reality. Locally, organizations have come together to form county-based hunger coalitions that have worked collaboratively to achieve greater effectiveness.

Still, food insecurity and poverty are major concerns in Wisconsin. Food pantries report large increases in demand. Our food stamp participation rate (below 50%) is the 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest in the U.S., our food stamp benefits are the smallest, and we rank last in access to School Breakfast. Despite important advances there is clearly a great deal more to do.

There have been previous statewide collaborative efforts to address hunger in Wisconsin. In 1994, Act 168 established the Board on Hunger. They issued annual reports and distributed over \$1 million in grants to 70 local projects before ending in 1999. That same year a multi-sector partnership formed the Wisconsin Food Security Consortium to increase coordination. Although there was progress, it became inactive in 2002 when the administration changed.

Several key stakeholders recognized the gap left by the inactive Consortium and held informal discussions. By February 2005 a survey of key organizations found 95% were interested in creating a new, more effective hunger network to facilitate more collaboration among state, regional and local partners. UW-Extension Family Living Programs and the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services hosted the first meeting in March 2005, and continue now as co-chairs of the Consortium.

During initial meetings the group clarified its purpose: *“The Wisconsin Food Security Consortium, representing diverse sectors in the fight against hunger, is dedicated to the elimination of food insecurity in Wisconsin. The Consortium will serve as a networking forum to develop and promote effective solutions through education, collaboration, new partnerships and public policy that measurably reduce hunger.”* Key themes also emerged, including Education & Outreach, Funding, Collaboration, Networking, Planning & Policy, Local Connections, and Research.

It must be noted that from the very beginning, the Consortium was strongly motivated by the impressive accomplishments of the [Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force](#) (OHRTF), a statewide, legislatively mandated task force. This task force has researched and prepared a strategic plan for Oregon: [Act to End Hunger](#), identifying 40 concrete steps to make a difference in 5 years. They have also developed [talking points about hunger](#) so diverse groups could educate

community members and policy makers and reinforce common messages. Their progress has been significant. Oregon's food insecurity rate has improved from last place to a middle ranking. Food stamp participation has increased 80%. They have increased support and outreach for Child Nutrition Programs, have increased funding for emergency food, and created refundable Child Care Tax Credits. Their message is simple: "hunger is an income issue". Their goal is to involve all sectors (businesses, schools, religious organizations, service providers, media, farmers, government & individuals) in addressing hunger's causes, not just its symptoms.

The Wisconsin Food Security Consortium met 7 times in 2005 because members adopted a short-term strategy of meeting monthly for face-to-face, full-day meetings. The intent of this schedule was to build working relationships, a common knowledge base, and catalyze momentum.

By the end of 2005, the Consortium has developed into a strong, committed, and cohesive group. Evidence of its continuing momentum include two noteworthy priorities identified for the future. First, the Consortium will continue the dialog they have begun with the state of Oregon, in hopes of emulating the Act to End Hunger action plan in Wisconsin. Secondly, the Consortium will initiate a dialog with local anti-hunger organizations in Wisconsin to share our vision and progress toward a statewide network and to invite their participation and perspective. We all need to work towards achieving Wisconsin's health and nutrition priorities.

The Wisconsin Food Security Consortium is co-chaired by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services and the University of Wisconsin-Extension. Current members include representatives from the state's nutrition assistance programs, major food banks, Wisconsin Community Action Agency Association, faith-based organizations, local hunger coalitions, and others.