

Nancy Walters with the Easton Hunger Coalition

1. How prominent is the issue of food insecurity in Easton?

We do not have accurate statistics that definite the exact number of people in Easton who are food insecure. However, we can extrapolate information from various sources. For example, we have 11 food pantries, 5 free meal centers and 3 shelters. Homeless people also live outdoors in tents, and there is an annual homeless count every January (I can connect you to the group that collects this information). Homelessness and hunger go hand in hand. All 11 food pantries report that they are serving more and more people and that they could distribute more often if more food was available. HOWEVER we must realize that people can go to more than one pantry, and we know that they do this. There is no restriction on the number of pantries or free meals you can access. So one may question need vs reliance. A better statistic may be extrapolated from the number of free meals served to children in the enrolled public school (EASD) based on qualifying for the meals by family income. Over 43 % of the EASD children qualify for the meals - which amounts to over 4000 students. These students are from families who live in our communities (18040,18045,18042). This gives us an indication that low income families need the help provided by the free meal. As far as averages are concerned, Easton has less people in need than in Bethlehem, and they both have less than in Allentown. So by some measure we are doing "better". Pennsylvania has numbers about average in relationship to national hunger statistics - about 1 in 6 people need to access emergency food. There is no question that there is a significant amount of food insecurity in Easton, but quantifying it has been a guessing game at best.

2. What efforts has the EHC made to address the problem?

Our efforts are focused on collaboration. The organization was founded (by me) because I saw that the agencies and groups that were providing emergency food were not necessarily speaking to each other or collaborating. I thought that this method could undercover gaps in service or redundancies or commonalities that we could study/use to reduce reliance on emergency food. We try to provide a public forum for this conversation and opportunities for participating agencies/groups/individuals to examine, define and impact the situation.

3. How did you become involved?

I've been a volunteer all my adult life, and often an activist/leader. Predominantly through my church (Arndt's Lutheran) I became involved with hunger and homeless issues locally by providing collected food and meals to several agencies. I became curious about why we needed to continually run food drives and what was the story behind this, so I tried to educate myself about local, regional and national hunger issues. I purchased the rights to show the film, "A Place at the Table" and used my knowledge to give speeches to local groups on the

topic, to raise awareness on trying to resolve hunger in our midst. I started a food Backpack Pals program in the Easton ASD with 2 other partners, and that has grown substantially and is now administered within the district, and also spawned a similar program in the Bethlehem Area SD. I was at that point talking to a lot of people about this, and decided the best way to go forward was in the context of an actual organization, and I came up with the idea of the coalition, called people together (I invited 100+ to a meeting on this and 70 attended). We collectively took it from there. This is our third year of organizing the coalition, and I believe it will take 5-7 years for it to be strong enough and stable enough to survive my leadership and stand on its own.

4. How has Lafayette been involved?

Lafayette students and staff have been involved in their own efforts to impact community needs. I know that the film I mentioned was shown on campus a few times before I came on the scene. Through meeting Bonnie Winfield I was able to access more student involvement through the Landis center. I've been active in food recovery which has led me to be involved in the Veggie Van and LaFarm and other sustainability issues that emanate from campus. When I get inquiries from Lafayette students I always respond and try to help (like through this!). I've been impressed with the caring and the intelligence that the students I have worked with have displayed. I try to maintain a good relationship with the students, as I hope that when they live in communities they will seek to address injustices in those communities.