

STATE OF HUNGER IN OREGON

(By Pat Feetham, St. Vincent de Paul, Hillsboro, OR, 12/27/2018)

I recently attended a conference hosted by the Oregon Food Bank—our Hertel Food Center’s primary source of nutritional food at affordable pricing. The keynote speaker was OFB CEO Susannah Morgan. She stated that there has been a slight change for the better in people experiencing hunger in our state—from 14.6% last year to 13% this year. This is still unacceptable in a state that prides itself as a great place to live and thrive.

Oregon is an agricultural state, growing more than 200 commercial food crops—enough food to help everyone who needs assistance. We want to thank the producers who donate to us, and our Food Alliance partners (grocery stores and suppliers) who continue to provide high quality healthy food to our Center. Even with all this help, Oregon continues to have a higher rate of hunger now than we had before the recession of 2008. The economy may be improving, but not for our poorer residents who continue to try and balance high rents, increased utility costs and other expenses and still eat.

A good definition of “hunger” means worrying about having enough nutritious food for your family, often called “food insecurity” by the government. No matter what we call it it’s still a scary situation for many of our residents.

The federal poverty level for a family of 4 is \$25,000 annually—an impossible wage to allow families to pay rent, utilities, other expense and still eat. Yet 68% of Oregon households report incomes at or below this level, and 78% of households with children report incomes at or below this level. The increase St. Vincent DePaul continues to see in those seeking help for food, rent and utility assistance reflects that need.

What can we do? We all need to understand the root causes that allow extreme poverty to exist in our community. We at St. Vincent de Paul fundamentally believe that poverty is a root cause of hunger and that poverty itself has a root cause. There are systemic inequities in housing and difficulties for our residents to access programs and services.

We are blessed with a generous and giving community, so we can continue our work at the Hertel Center providing food and other assistance to those less fortunate. Now we need your help to move toward true social justice—helping to focus on and begin to develop plans to reduce the root causes of poverty. A good start would be to contact your local and state representatives to ask the difficult questions--how we can work together to reduce hunger and inequitable housing practices in our community?

Working together we can make our communities even better places to live in for all our residents.