

Fifteen Years of Fighting Hunger:

The Legacy of the McLennan County Hunger Coalition

by Katie Cook and Chelle Samaniego

Back in 2003, Kenneth Moerbe began researching the number of people in McLennan County who were eligible for the program that was then called “Food Stamps” but weren’t receiving the benefit. “I had served about a year as executive director at Caritas of Waco when I began to wonder why the number of people being served at the agency kept growing every month,” he said.

It seemed that only about 43 percent of the people who could receive Food Stamps were doing so. “I decided that Caritas was the ideal agency to try to do something about that,” Moerbe said, “and I thought it was important enough to add a staff person to develop that effort.” He obtained funding from the Rapoport Foundation to develop a program called “HELPINGS: Food Stamp Outreach,”¹ and to employ Esther Morales to direct it. HELPINGS would become the first program launched by the McLennan County Hunger Coalition (MCHC).

Moerbe then began to meet with other agencies that were involved in responding to hunger in the community, “and see what we could do together to avoid duplication of effort and serve more people in need.” He met with leaders of Salvation Army of Waco, the Highland Baptist Church food pantry and Mission Waco. “It was from these conversations that Hunger Coalition was created,” he said.

The coalition began functioning as it is today in No-

vember 2005. By 2009, it had gained 501(c)3 non-profit status. Susan Duecy, one of the key early players, remembers that MCHC “was founded in recognition of the fact that our community had taken a ‘scattershot’ approach to feeding hungry citizens. There was no systematic or organized way to provide assistance. Our meager resources were probably not being used effectively.”

Sheryl Swanton, who joined the group early in its history as a representative of Lone Star Legal Aid, said, “Addressing food insecurity just seems like a very basic, fundamental part of creating a successful community and society. People who are not facing a lack of food for themselves and their children are better parents, employees and citizens.”

She remembers that Moerbe invited a group of people to a meeting at Caritas. The group included several organizers of food pantries in the area, Matt Hess from the World Hunger Relief Training Farm and representatives of other organizations interested in providing food for indigent people.

“Kenneth had the personality to bring everyone together and the vision to cause the collaboration of all the organizations to happen,” Swanton said. “I think MCHC has improved our community, and we have Kenneth to thank for that.”

Mike Beheler, currently owner of Our Breakfast Place, came on board as a representative of the Waco Restaurant Association. He remembers early meetings, “listening to [former Waco mayor] Malcolm Duncan, Sr. in that tiny Caritas ‘hodgepodge’ meeting room.” Beheler describes the first accomplishments as “attempting to coordinate, communicate, cooperate and combine the efforts of the community to best serve those with food insecurity.” The group took on projects like “food recovery, summer meals for children, weekend backpack programs, feeding kids and seniors with ANY outreach we could,” Beheler said.

“The best moment for me was when we received a grant from the Grande Communications employees,” Beheler said. The Grande employees donated annually to a company fund and then voted to choose the recipient. They chose MCHC, and have done so more than



“Members of the McLennan County Hunger Coalition board of directors: (from left) Chelle Samaniego, Craig Nash, Katie Cook, Esther Morales and Laura Ziemer. Not pictured: YKenya Robertson. Photo by Doug McDurham.”

once. "Until then, we were naïve about how well we and our projects had become recognized in the community," he said.

Beheler, who served as the MCHC president for several years, described a special energy at the meetings. Moerbe said that perhaps the most significant accomplishment of the coalition was that the meetings provoked conversations and collaborations involving people who hadn't previously heard of each other, or each other's programs.

Although the HELTINGS program has been funded by Caritas for the past several years, Esther Morales still plays a major role in MCHC operations. "The Hunger Coalition was birthed into existence because hunger was a major problem in our community," she said. Morales and others named a number of people not mentioned yet in this article who contributed to the creation of the MCHC:

Maggie McCarthy, Rapoport Foundation; Judy Berkheimer, Texas Health and Human Services; James Rice, Jr., East Waco Development; Ed and Wanda Hyde, Operation Crisis; Eva Harkrider, Highland Baptist Church Care Center; Larry Root and Janet Harrison, Salvation Army; Bob Maxwell, Riesel's Fill My Cup Pantry; Luis Martinez, Seventh Day Adventist Church; Melody McDermitt, Central Texas Senior Ministry; Richard Plowman, Loaves and Fishes Storehouse Pantry; James Gilmore, Texas State Technical College; Cliff Reese, Waco Independent School District; Jimmy Dorrell and Carlton Willis, Mission Waco.

Other accomplishments over the years include the inauguration of efforts that are still ongoing today: the "Spring onto Summer" food drive, veterans assistance programs, homeless outreach programs, urban gardening efforts, hunger benefit concerts and hunger advocacy.

The Hunger Action Team, a subcommittee of the coalition, meets monthly to discuss public policy and how to raise awareness in the community. A major advocacy project is participation in National Hunger & Homelessness Awareness Week (NHHAW). MCHC created a local committee several years ago and continues to promote activities for the last full week before Thanksgiving. The NHHAW calendar continues to grow, promoting two or three events a day—including the Heart of Texas CROP Hunger Walk, the Altrusa Turkey Trot, the Food For Families food drive and letter-writing campaigns. This year, NHHAW will include a memorial service for homeless people who have died in the past year in our area, and a movie at the Jubilee Theatre.

MCHC also produces a hunger action calendar for the month of November, with specific action ideas for each day. The daily goals range from stocking shelves at a pantry to looking a homeless person in the eye.

Laura Ziemer of Meals on Wheels Waco serves as the current president of the coalition's board. She says the first time she learned about MCHC was some five years ago through a co-worker who was helping to plan

events for NHHAW. "I remember being impressed by how much people cared about working together to alleviate hunger in the community," she said.

"I agreed to become part of the MCHC board because I knew the people I would be working with had a passion for fighting hunger in McLennan County. I knew that I would have support from people who were experts in fighting hunger, and I was excited for how we could harness our shared knowledge to make a real difference," Ziemer said.

A grant proposal from 2009, found among old MCHC files, states that the coalition had just begun to collaborate with the newly formed Texas Hunger Initiative (THI) to serve as a model for other hunger coalitions throughout the state. The MCHC-THI relationship is being renewed this year with a partnership between the two organizations that will begin in 2020.

"Our vision [at THI] is to end hunger in Waco through strategic collaborative effort led by MCHC," said Jeremy Everett, THI's executive director. "I am truly energized by the possibilities of our partnership with MCHC."

As MCHC and THI enter a new era of accomplishment in increasing food security, Ziemer describes her dream in this way:

My hope is that the coalition can educate everyone on the causes of hunger and ways to combat hunger on the local, state and federal level. My dream is for the coalition to help de-stigmatize hunger and humanize the factors that lead to hunger, and thus create a more compassionate and empathetic community.

Morales, when asked why she feels the work of MCHC is important work and why she became involved all those years ago, quoted a passage from the Gospel of Matthew: "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt. 25:35). This mandate—to feed the hungry, to remember the poor, to welcome the stranger—spans almost every religion in the world.

"Our core value as a coalition was formed on this principle, and still stands true today as we continue our vision of being 'United to End Hunger in McLennan County,'" Morales said. "The work was important then and continues to be even more so now."

—Katie Cook and Chelle Samaniego are both members of the McLennan County Hunger Coalition board of directors. Katie is the editor for *Seeds of Hope Publishers* and also edits *Baptist Peacemaker*, the journal of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. Chelle, in addition to award-winning reporting for *Seeds*, writes under the name Dawn Michelle Michals. (Please visit www.dawnmichellemichals.com for more information.)

Endnote

1. It is now called HELTINGS: SNAP Outreach. SNAP, formerly Food Stamps, stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.