Hunger Talks.

Are we listening?

Real stories of hunger and its root causes, from the Ohio Association of Foodbanks.
“Eve” Beulah

“Eve” (pseudonym) is a German immigrant who taught college art history courses until she was 70, but can’t buy enough food on her own now that she’s retired.

“I only came [to the soup kitchen] after my minister said, ‘Why don’t you go there? You have so little money.’”

Evelyn and her 16-year-old great grandson, who she is raising, live in a one bedroom senior apartment.

“I volunteered with our church. I never thought about getting the food myself, but then I started to. I don’t eat that much, but at that time when I know I can’t buy a pound of hamburger, that’s when the foodbank really helps.”

Beulah has raised her two grandchildren since her daughter, their mother, died when they were young.

“There are people like us, who are retired, and with the price of everything going up... do we take our medications to stay healthy, or do we eat?”

“Eve” (pseudonym) is a German immigrant who taught college art history courses until she was 70, but can’t buy enough food on her own now that she’s retired.

“I only came [to the soup kitchen] after my minister said, ‘Why don’t you go there? You have so little money.’”

Hunger is not an isolated experience. Nearly one in five Ohioans live without access to enough healthy food.

At the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, we know the statistics. But it can be easy to ignore the reality of hunger when it is disguised in numbers and figures. The reality of hunger can best be explained by the people who experience it firsthand, and we invite you to listen to some of their stories.

While working on this project, we spoke with people from every area of Ohio. We found hunger in rural, urban, and suburban communities. We spoke with seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, working parents, and adults struggling with unemployment. And with each conversation, we learned more about the root causes of hunger and the tremendous difficulty of coping with hunger.

Thank you for taking some time to get to know the people who agreed to share their experiences. We hope that their stories inform you about the reality of hunger in our state and empower you to join with us to take action against it. Hunger is a complex problem, and we can only address it by working together.
I get a very small amount of food stamps. It’s still not enough. And people are talking about cutting that benefit completely? Kids will starve. That is a cold, hard fact. There are children that will starve in America.

“Every single day, I get up and make the most of that day, because that’s what moms do.”

Shellie is currently living with her two teenage children in a hotel room. They had to move out of the house they were renting after it was condemned because of black mold.

“I feel sorry for my kids because times are harder now than they’ve ever been. You know, I didn’t have to live like this as a child. We didn’t live in hotel rooms. We never went without. And you know, my kids are going without. At the end of the month, I have to tell them, ‘all I have is dinner food,’ because there’s nothing to put on the table for breakfast or lunch.”

“It’s awful, disheartening. I feel like a complete loser right now, to be honest. Because I can’t do for my kids like I should be. I can’t provide for them like I’m used to providing. I try to look for work, but I can’t get hired anywhere. There’s no jobs in Vermilion, there’s not.”

“I know Grace’s Kitchen has been a blessing to me. We get a lot of fresh fruit, we get breads. That’s a treat, because we don’t get fresh fruit at home because it’s so expensive. So when we have that the kids are like ‘yeah, fruit, this is awesome!’”

“Trust me, America is very concerned about it [cuts to food stamps]. They do something like that, that’s saying you don’t care about your children. Really? You run the country but you don’t care about the kids here? They’re our future. They’re our next presidents, they’re our next nurses, they’re our next doctors, they’re next. How dare you take from them. It’s not right. You’ve never known hunger, to take something away like that. You’ve never been hungry.”

“If you’d ever been hungry you know you don’t take away things like that.”
“It’s just working and trying to make ends meet... it’s hard, it’s very hard.”

Hard work and sacrifice are familiar to Bridget and her husband. Early in their marriage, she cared for their infant son while he served as a Marine in Desert Storm. Both have always worked hard to support their family. In 2008, a botched gall bladder surgery landed Bridget in the hospital and kept her from working for a year. Now, she works at a fast food restaurant and is trying to help her children through college.

“So ever since then, it’s been going downhill. You get ahead, and then you get a setback. They cut my food stamps. They said I make too much money working. My husband is disabled. He’s got 15 different medications, and he just had surgery. I’m full-time [at work], but if we’re not busy they send us home.”

“If I could do it over again, I would have went to college. I can still go back now, because I want to have my own daycare. I teach Sunday School class, I love it. But I’m trying to get them [her kids] through college first. All three of them want to be teachers. I’m very proud, I’d bend over backwards for them. It’s hard, but I’ll go without so they can have. That’s the kind of parent I am.”

“We’re making it, but by the grace of God, that’s all I can say.”

“I try not to come [to the food pantry] unless I really really have to... I mean, I’m not ashamed, but I just know there’s somebody out there... somebody’s going to need it more than me. I don’t come often. This is hurting my pride, but I know we need it, so I had to do something.”

About 85 percent of food insecure households with children have at least one working adult.¹

Seventy-five percent of the households that receive emergency food in Ohio have incomes below the federal poverty level.²

¹ U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Economic Research Service (national data)
² MATHEMATICA, Hunger in Ohio 2010
“Prices have gone up, work has gone down. Simple as that.”

Raymond is a veteran of the Vietnam War era and began visiting the Allen County Veterans Food Pantry when hours became harder to come by at his construction company about five years ago.

“I’m from Massachusetts, moved here in ’76, married my wife in 1980, when the economy was good. I was making more money then than I am now. I’m the one who brought home the money, my wife raised the kids at home. We did pretty good back in the 80s. But not after 2000, things just went downhill.”

“I’m grateful for what I get. We make do. My wife, she got laid off from a temp job, she’s on unemployment, so she gets a little from that. I work for a company now, and they’re down, so I’m just working whatever hours I can. I try to keep busy. I got my house tore up, and I need to fix it, no money to fix it, so I’m kind of bartering, you know like ‘I’ll do this for you, if you give me this’ so I can repair it.”

“When the economy is good, I make up to $35 to $40 an hour. But don’t get me wrong, I really try not to go by the economy because then I fix myself into it. I try to keep myself separate from the economy, by believing what the word of God says, you know, God’s economy. And this is part of God’s economy. He said he’s not going to let his people go hungry. Here’s the food, I’m going to take it. I served [in the military], it’s there, I’m going to come and get it. It helps me out, helps my wife out, got to eat, so it helps out tremendously.”

“We pray. That’s what we do. Look at our bills, we don’t have the money. So we just pray.”
“It’s hard for me, because I used to bring clients to the pantry. ‘Except by the grace of God, there would go I’ I would say, and now here I am.’

Roberta was a county caseworker for 25 years, and prior to that, a school board member for ten years. She spent her career helping struggling individuals and families, while raising her own family.

“I retired, and then, financially- illness, doctor bills, medical bills. So the little that I had put aside was consumed. I had two aneurysms, so I’m lucky. I’m blessed. But I still have big bills, because our insurance only covers so much, so I’m caught in that age where I can’t get Medicare. I only have what we got from our retirement so that leaves me with big deductibles. So medically I’m in a big pickle.”

“Luckily when I was working I took a course so I could help the clients that I serve, so I know how to fix a meal for four on a little bit of meat, and how to have vegetables and how to make the children enjoy the vegetables. If you don’t know how to shop, you’re not going to get your bang for your dollar.”

“We need to do something better... it can be done, but it’s going to be a lot of work.”

According to a recent study, the greater cost of hunger in Ohio in 2010 was $6.97 billion.¹

Hunger leads to increased health costs for seniors, in addition to higher rates of illness in children and lower worker productivity in adults.²

³ Center for American Progress, Hunger in America: Suffering We All Pay For

And it does hurt to know that we can’t really do what we need to do. You plan for this time—retirement—and then all it takes is one something to knock you down.
“I’ve had my job for about two years. I still have a hard time.”

Spencer and his girlfriend have two young boys. Spencer works full-time for an established company in the welding supply industry. The couple is considering moving in with relatives in order to make ends meet.

“We used to get food stamps, and then I got a raise, which supplements some of it. I wouldn’t mind if they were like, ‘Okay, we’re not going to send you so much.’ That’d be awesome because I’d still be able to make it at the end of the week, but I can’t because they’ve stopped it completely. Because according to the State of Ohio, I make too much money. And that seems to be a lot of people’s problem. And I’m not in a situation where I’m unemployed, I’m not in a situation where I’m underutilized at work.”

“It’s like every month you just sit around and you’re just waiting for that moment when something breaks on your car, or something goes wrong with the house that you have to replace. I’m sick and tired of doing that. I never even knew about this place [the food pantry] growing up, and then you become aware of these kinds of things because things get so bad.”

“It’s kind of upsetting, and just, almost to the point that I don’t care anymore, I just want to protect my family. Seriously. They say the only place you can make a difference is at the polls. Stop voting on your paychecks and start voting for the people who care. And that’s us. We’ve been fooled.”

“There’s no answers for what’s going on.”

“I’m sick and tired of wanting to take my kids out to the pumpkin patch and letting them do what everybody else does, and I’m asking my dad for 16 bucks. And of course he doesn’t care, he doesn’t mind, but I mind. It bothers me.”

Over 57 percent of the households served by Ohio’s emergency food assistance network last year were households with children.4

Statewide, about 25.9 percent of children live in food insecure households.5

4 Ohio Association of Foodbanks
5 Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap 2012
"When my insulin runs out, I have a choice of feeding the kids or buying insulin."

Lorna is a retired teacher raising six grandchildren. Nearly 70 years old, she has gone back to work in her retirement as a teacher’s aide and still struggles to keep up with the costs of raising her grandkids while managing her diabetes. She doesn’t qualify for food stamps, so she relies on a local food pantry, where she is a volunteer.

“It’s still a struggle to make ends meet, especially with food. My grandson’s 15 and could open the door and eat the whole refrigerator. I buy for the kids and I eat what the kids eat. And I don’t follow the [diabetes] diet, because I don’t have the money to buy all the food that I know I need.”

“I feel so sorry for these older people who have no insurance. I’m very lucky. I have good insurance with the teacher’s retirement, and it covers most of it. But then it comes down to paying the extra, that’s what I struggle with. I have to pay $40 a month [for insulin], which is no big deal. But if I run out in the middle of the month? You say ‘plan for it and hold it back,’ well forget that. You hold it back and then they [the grandkids] need food, then you spend for the food.”

“I’m not into politics. [But] if they started talking about providing food, boy, my ears would perk up and they’d get my vote.”

“There’s many people like me in this country, and no jobs.”

Many people who access the emergency food assistance network in Ohio report having to choose between food and other necessities.

About 42 percent had to choose between paying for food and paying for medicine or medical care. 6

6 MATHEMATICA, Hunger in Ohio 2010

"Besides food, it’s gas that kills me. I live out in the country and I could spend $20 a day on gas."
“None of us want to be in this spot. I know I don’t. But some of us are just trapped.”

Antonio served in the military and was injured during a mission in Honduras in 1986. Two years later, his knee completely gave out, and the doctor found fragments of a bullet that the VA had not removed at the time of his gunshot wound. Now, he receives disability payments that aren't enough to get him through the month.

“If I choose to work, I will lose all my benefits. And plus being 50 years old, I need the benefits. So I'm sort of stuck between a rock and a hard place. Being 50, I can’t really go out into the workforce and get a factory job with a disability, with younger guys fighting for it. What are you going to do? They’re [the VA] going to start me on this rehab thing. They’re going to train me to do something else.”

“People want to say, ‘Well, how’d you get trapped?’ and they want to blame it on drugs or alcohol... I would ask them to come down here and walk in our shoes for awhile, you know what I mean? I mean not just come and throw a publicity stunt and shake hands but actually come down and follow a couple of us around for the day. Lost a job, lost everything, can’t get welfare, can’t get food stamps, and if you do they want you to do this and do that and you don’t have transportation to get there and back to do it. What do you do? You come to places like this [the food pantry] in order to survive.”

“I hate to say it but a lot of us are so down and out... we’re in survival mode.”
“It’s a struggle paying bills and keeping up with my kids and college.”

Krystal is a single mom of three who says her kids “saved her life.” She is a full-time student working toward an associate degree that will train her to repair mobile construction and agricultural equipment.

“I try to shop as thrifty as I can, but still I’ll be lucky to get into the third week with money. I have a growing boy, and you would be amazed, my eight-year-old is the skinniest little girl, and she does not stop eating.”

“I got approved [for a work study program] today, I’m so excited. I’ll get to work in a lab, I’ll have more experience with the tools. It’s challenging, but it’s just challenging enough to keep me moving.”

“Being a single mom is really hard. And going to college, it’s something better in my life, and I think it will eventually help. [But student loans are] not enough income to pay my bills and keep my kids in everything they need, which is why things like this [soup kitchen] are just amazing. They truly do help people. It’s just nice to know that you have community that will back you up. It’s just hard out here for everybody.”

“It hurts not to be able to provide without assistance, but it’s also amazing that it’s there.”

“Food insecurity among children can result in higher rates of depression, diabetes, and other chronic conditions.

Even one experience with hunger has a negative impact on the health of children 10 and 15 years later.7

Food insecurity among children can result in higher rates of depression, diabetes, and other chronic conditions. Even one experience with hunger has a negative impact on the health of children 10 and 15 years later.7

7 Archives of Pediatric Medicine, Child Hunger and Long-term Adverse Consequences for Health
"My medicine took my whole check. Do you know what $250 does when you only get $400?"

Kitty and her husband Jerry are retired and living on Social Security. About five years ago, Kitty began coming to her local foodbank to receive a monthly senior box (Commodity Supplemental Food Program) when work became scarce for Jerry, a mason. Kitty says when Jerry found out about the food box, he was resistant.

"He said, ‘What did you do that for?’ Men are really proud about these things. But he doesn’t mind it when I make spaghetti out of the tomato juice, or cheese on his sandwich. He’s learned to live with it. I’m going to make beef and noodles out of the can of beef that we got last month. It does help."

"In the end [after the cost of medicine] I have $100 more a month. That means my husband’s [Social Security] check has to go to the lights and the gas and the garbage. He is a veteran so he doesn’t have these [medical] expenses because he can go to the VA. But if anything would happen to him, or to me, that means the money would be cut down. Worries me, because you know what he thinks is a good meal? A pound of bologna."

"Some of the elderly have a real hard time. Elderly people are the ones you should take care of, they’re the ones who forged what we have now."
A lot of people sometimes are in situations where they need a helping hand. It doesn’t indicate the person is good or bad. The food pantries have made a big difference.

R.J. and his wife have been married for twenty years and have three school-aged daughters. He had to stop working more than a year ago due to problems with his feet, caused by complications from diabetes.

"Custodial workers make the minimum, so that’s barely enough to pay your utilities, pay gas for the car, pay for clothing for your children. So my family needed a way for us to supplement our food. When I was diagnosed with my illness on my left foot, I couldn’t work. My wife worked part-time [as a nursing aide], so she had to start working full-time to pick up the slack. But at that point we were still bringing in less than I was making, so I started going to food pantries more often."

"You may not get everything that you want, but you get food, and it’s good quality food. And you can feed your families, and that’s the most important thing: making sure my girls have food and that they don’t go hungry. The food pantry gives you certain foods that you haven’t thought of before, but when you try them, they taste pretty good."

"Eventually, I will be able to walk. I want to go back to work. I won’t be able to be a custodial worker anymore, it’ll have to be... a call center, customer service, something like that. Hopefully within a year, I’ll get back on my feet and go from there."

"I’m so grateful for the food pantries, because of my current situation, that I’m able to go there, that I can feed my daughters, they won’t go starving."
“Usually every month, it’s what bill can we not pay and let it go until we can get food. We used to not get food assistance. I never thought I’d be on that stuff. I hate it, but it helps, it does.”

“Food stamps don’t last. It’s really expensive to be healthy.”

Melissa and her boyfriend live together with their three children. They work hard to make ends meet by combining the income they can come by, but sometimes they rely on a local food pantry when money is tight.

“This is my second time being here [at the food pantry]. I don’t go every month. I try to make my stuff last, because I know there’s people worse off than me who need it more. It’s really expensive to be healthy. I go in there [the grocery store] and just picture meals, that’s what I do when I go shopping. Like, if I get hamburger, there’s three meals in just that one piece of meat.”

“I grew up poor, with my mom and dad, really poor. That’s how we got our food, he would hold the sign, you know, ‘We will work for food. God bless.’ And he’d make me stand there when I was little. Do you know how embarrassing that is? But that’s how we got our food.”

“It’s not like I have to go do what my dad did to get paid. [But] you get stuck and rely on the help [from food stamps], then they take it from you because it goes by your income. They take it from you and then you have to go to places like this [food pantries]. People are just struggling, just day by day. Just keep going to places like this and think one day it’s going to be a lot better. You have to stay positive, or it will just throw you down.”

“It’s scary for the people that struggle. The rich, they have nothing to worry about.”
“There’s been days when I have not had a good meal.”

Adam has been disabled his entire life. He lives on his own off of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments and receives $136 a month in food stamps.

“Where I live, I don’t have a kitchen. I have a toaster oven and a microwave. I try to make them [food stamps] last a month, but it’s really hard to do. I would say about three weeks or less, that’s about all they last. I do the very best I can to budget, but it’s hard. Everything’s so expensive in the stores, you really can’t gauge how much you’re going to spend.”

“My mom told me not to work, because my check will get cut. And then if they [Social Security] see me working, and I’m not making enough to live on while I’m working, then I’m pretty much in the hole. And I don’t want to put myself in that position. And even though I’m on benefits, it’s only about $8,055 a year.”

“I’m really happy for this place because it really helps. At the end of the month when I don’t have any food, or I need groceries, I can come at the end of the month and get food. I always buy food first. I don’t ever want to run out, but sometimes I do run out of food, and that’s why I come here.”

“It makes me feel depressed when I don’t have anything to eat.”

In Ohio, the average monthly SNAP benefit per person is about $138.

Nationally, the typical food secure household spends 24 percent more for food than the typical food insecure household, including food purchased with SNAP benefits.
Nothing colder than politics. No caring in politics. Politics is politics. I don’t want to play politics. I want to feed people. Most of them are good people that have worked all of their lives, they can’t help what’s going on."

Kathy

"There’s a need for food. There’s a far greater need than is being met."

Kathy is a widow who volunteers and serves on the board at her local food pantry in rural Ohio. She first visited the pantry years ago during her husband’s illness. Now, on a limited income that is just slightly too high for her to receive food stamps, she is providing food for a full house after opening up her home to struggling family members.

"My husband had had a heart attack. He was an electrician, so he wasn’t able to work. About three years after that, he started losing his heart and needed a heart transplant... two years waiting on a heart. He lived another five years after the heart [transplant], I was his sole caregiver, and during that time I had to come [to the pantry]."

"How do you feel when you go in the kitchen and there’s three kids sitting there, and you don’t have any food? I’ve done it. I have these kids, regardless if they’re mine. People say, ‘Well, it’s not really your responsibility,’ but wait, that’s my grandson, he is my responsibility. If it wasn’t for the food pantry, there’s a lot of people that wouldn’t eat one or two weeks out of the month.”

"You come in here and you need help, you get help. As long as we have food. But we can’t help anybody without any food. I would love to be put out of business because there’s no need. Not because there’s too much need. That’s what we’re facing... we have more need now than we ever did.”

"How do we get more food in here? Because we have to find a way.”

Ohio’s 12 Feeding America foodbanks and their greater network of hunger relief organizations distributed 45 percent more food in state fiscal year 2012 than during the height of the recession, three years earlier.11
Hunger has many root causes. It can happen in a crisis when a family experiences job loss or illness. It can happen to veterans struggling to reenter the workforce and people with disabilities living in poverty. It can happen to working adults earning low wages while providing for their children. It can happen to seniors with fixed incomes and high medical costs. The Hunger Factors Index below shows how poverty, unemployment, and wages directly impact the nearly one in five Ohioans who don’t always have access to enough food.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hunger Factors Index</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median Income*</td>
<td>8.95</td>
<td>9.95</td>
<td>13.04</td>
<td>12.65</td>
<td>12.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Poverty</td>
<td>$48,385</td>
<td>$47,428</td>
<td>$45,395</td>
<td>$46,275</td>
<td>$45,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Unemployment</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Median income adjusted for inflation.
† Index combining Ohio’s economic indicators (median income, poverty, and unemployment). An index value of zero would represent no poverty, no unemployment, and an Ohio median income equal to that of the 2007 national average.

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks is Ohio's largest charitable response to hunger. Our mission is to assist Ohio's 12 Feeding America foodbanks in providing food and other resources to people in need and to pursue areas of common interest for the benefit of people in need. Ohio's 12 Feeding America foodbanks provide food, funding, training, and technical support to about 3,300 hunger relief organizations in all of Ohio's 88 counties.