



# Central Illinois Foodbank History

June 7, 2007



## Celebrating 25 years of fighting hunger

# Fighting Hunger Feeding Hope



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## Central Illinois Foodbank Celebrates 25 Years of Fighting Hunger

Armed with an empty warehouse at Brother James Monastery, an initial donation of 2000 pounds of apple cobbler mix, and a handful of staff, Central Illinois Foodbank opened its doors to agencies on June 7, 1982. The mission was plain: “We just wanted to feed people who were hungry,” founding Board member Judy Morrow says. “It was as simple as that.”

While the goal sounds uncomplicated, making it a reality has proved to be far more complex. The Foodbank’s survived a share of natural disasters, floods, tornadoes, and ice storms, as well as a few of a different sort. The bear markets of the mid-eighties weighed heavily on donations; in the early nineties the building was set on fire by an arsonist.

Yet twenty-five years later Central Illinois Foodbank stands stronger than ever, and dedicated to its original goal. “We feed the hungry,” current executive director Pam Molitoris explains, echoing Morrow. “That’s our mission; working as efficiently as we can to provide food to those in need.”

Last year the Foodbank distributed 4.2 million pounds of food to 160 agencies in twenty-one central Illinois counties. Agencies are facilities or programs that provide food to people at no charge. Of the agencies the Foodbank serves, about half are food pantries (which give bags of groceries to clients). Soup kitchens comprise twenty percent of the Foodbank’s partners, and the remaining types of programs include after-school programs, residential centers, and adult or child day cares.

Occupying a warehouse that holds up to 700,000 pounds of food – that’s 25-30 semi truck loads – the Foodbank turns over its inventory in six weeks on average. Industrial shelves tower with pallets of peanut butter, crackers, canned vegetables, and diapers. Each day, five to eight agencies visit the Foodbank to load up trucks. The Foodbank also delivers to areas too far away for regular appointments to come to Springfield.

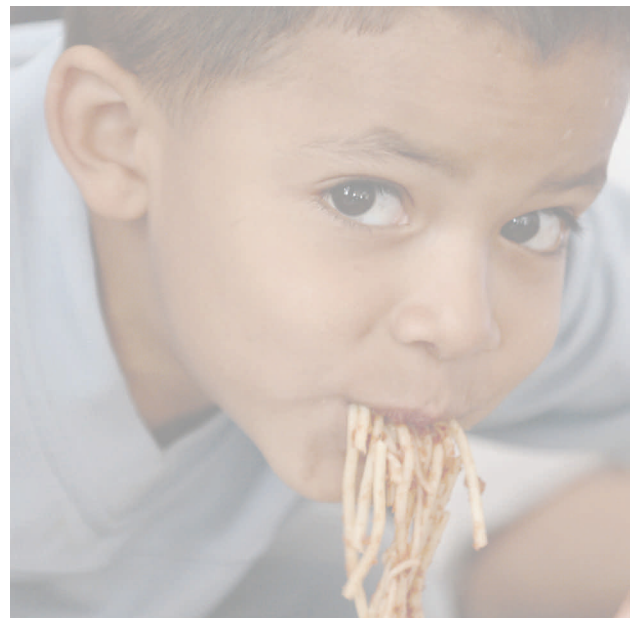
Staff see that the community is beginning to understand the scope of the Foodbank. “Two from yesterday,” Gloria

Shanahan, communications director, announces. She walks through the office waving a newspaper clipping. “Channel 20 last night and SJ-R this morning.”

Today \$2500 in donations arrives with the mail. Businesses call for clues as to who’s currently leading in the Corporate Food Fight Challenge. They know the winner will be announced soon; and everything’s fair because pounds of food raised is figured per employee, not pounds total. It’s a refreshing thing about the non-profit world. The little guy with heart has the same chance of winning as the corporate giant.

The Foodbank’s face watches the future, just like the hunger it strives to end. Both know the other’s not going away. “What are we going to do if we get this grant?” Molitoris asks a few staff members at lunch. A forklift, some one says, opening a bag of carrots and crunching. There’s a contented silence. “You know what I’d really like?” Kristy Gilmore suggests. She’s in charge of getting food into the Foodbank. “A mobile pantry.” The start-up costs are high, they all know, but that doesn’t dampen their spirits.

Nothing at Central Illinois Foodbank is impossible. In a place built twenty-five years ago on a few thousand dollars and a ton of apple cobbler, and now distributing over four million pounds of food every year, the only place to look is forward.



# Where It All Began...

**F**oodbanking began in the late 60s with John van Hengel, a self proclaimed beach bum, staring into a dumpster. He said he listened to a mother of ten whose husband sat on death row while she struggled to support the family. Van Hengel noticed that the kids looked nourished, and asked her how she fed them. She told him her secret was the dumpster behind a grocery store. Van Hengel looked in the bin and saw food; frozen carrots, stale bread, dented cans. He talked to the manager of the store and learned that good food is often thrown away if deemed “unsalable.” Sometimes dents in cans, or one broken bottle in a case of ketchup, can send entire cases of food to the dumpster. Van Hengel asked if he could

have such leftover food to take to a pantry where he volunteered. “Sure,” the manager shrugged. And thus the process of foodbanking began.

Within a year, after numerous rejec-

tions for facilities, von Hengel’s “Foodbank” found a home in an old Phoenix bakery. St. Mary’s Catholic Church paid the utility bills, and von Hengel and a few volunteers distributed 250,000 pounds of food to 36 charities. As of June 2005, St. Mary’s Foodbank of Phoenix provides

around 60 million pounds of food to 900 agencies each year. The concept of foodbanking is a simple one: corporations have billions of pounds of product they can’t sell.

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**From the half-eaten mega portions at restaurants to tons of crackers with a misspelled word on the packaging, each of us tosses away around 320 pounds throughout each year. Meanwhile, hunger and food insecurity affect 25 million people, including nine million children and three million**

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Maybe it didn’t do well in stores; perhaps there’s a printing error on the package. Because dumping is expensive, foodbanks act as clearing houses for such food. Corporations can donate to foodbanks, get a lucrative tax write off, and foodbanks then distribute food to local agencies.

But there’s no such thing as a free lunch – unless you are a client of a pantry or soup kitchen. One of van Hengel’s original promises to corporations was that donated food would never be resold. Those who are hungry pay nothing for the food given to them. Instead, cost is absorbed by foodbanks and the agencies that distribute food. Foodbanks rely on individual and business donors, and are often recipients of funding from United Way and various grants. Agencies pay up to an 18 cents per pound shared maintenance fee that helps contribute toward the transportation and storage costs Foodbanks incur.

America is a culture of waste. According to the E.P.A., more than 25% of our food – that’s 96 billion pounds of food a year – go to waste. While some of this food would not be consumable, a large percentage of it is. As a nation we spend around \$1 billion a year on food disposal. From the half-eaten mega portions at restaurants to tons of crackers with a misspelled word on the packaging, each of us tosses away around 320 pounds throughout each year. Meanwhile, hunger and food insecurity affect 25 million people, including nine million children and three million seniors, on an annual basis.



**H**unger in America appears to be a paradox when set next to the problem of obesity. Recent statistics plastered on our screens tell us that we're a fat country. The American Obesity Association reports that 64.5% of U.S. adults over 20 are classified as overweight, and 30.5% are obese. What's more surprising than this statistic is that both problems often affect the same people at the same time – those with low income households are most likely to be hungry and fat simultaneously.

What happens is easy to explain, but a challenge to remedy. When families do not have adequate resources to buy food, they have to choose the cheapest products in the store. Fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, and breads are replaced by cans and boxes of pre-packaged, preserved meals loaded with carbohydrates and fats. Therefore, even though lower income households may not “starve,” they are going without proper nutrition. As a result, people become overweight, and lack the resources to purchase foods that are satisfying and healthy.

A co-existing factor in the obesity and hunger issue is that of food security. According to America's Second Harvest, food stamps last an average of two and a half weeks. Many times the working poor are not eligible for additional help, creating a likely situation that a family of four may find themselves unsure where the meals at the end of the month will come from. So when food's available, they may over consume. As a result, such inconsistent and inadequate diets can bring about physiological changes that cause the body to store more calories as fat.

And that's why someone can be obese and hungry at the same time.

The face of hunger is deceptive. Pictures of emaciated African villages mingle with lax terminology in the American mind. “I'm starved,” I might say at lunch, even though I ate a bowl of

Cheerios just four hours ago – not to mention the doughnut on my coffee break at 10. We're told to lose weight, the internet can measure our BMI, and we're advised to avoid carbs this year (even though many of us can recall eating nothing but rice cakes a mere decade ago). Shedding inches is important to us; we don't think twice about putting our money where our Big Mac is.

In 1990 Americans spent six billion dollars on diet products. Fifteen years later, according to Forbes.com, we're shelling out \$46 billion for self help books and weight loss systems. When we're this desperate to stop eating, it's difficult for us to imagine that people in our own town aren't getting enough.

We imagine the hungry to be bones protruding and eyes sunken. We believe that soup kitchens are congregating places for the homeless, criminal, and lazy. Food pantries, we think, serve poor minorities who live off welfare. We've all seen that Dateline where an undercover Samaritan picks up a guy holding a ‘Will Work For Food’ sign and offers a list of odd jobs. The man, it turns out, has as little interest in working as he did in accepting groceries in lieu of money for payment.

Such characters, much like the once touted ‘Welfare Queen’ image, have inundated themselves in the American collective consciousness since the dawn of social programs. The facts behind such figures, however, reveal a very different portrait of the hungry in the United States.

Recent statistics released by America's Second Harvest in the [Hunger in America 2006](#) report that 40% of people who receive food assistance are non-Hispanic whites. An almost equal percentage is categorized as “working poor,” meaning at least one adult in the household is employed. Only 12% of food recipients are homeless.

Hunger wears a mask. So we don't recognize it, even though it lives a mile across town, or maybe even just a few houses away.

**How can someone be overweight and hungry at the same time?**

# WORKING TOGETHER

Central Illinois Foodbank serves 22% of the state's geography, its territory stretching as far west as Quincy, south as Mt. Vernon, and east as Effingham. Serving mostly rural areas, the Foodbank strives to increase its output to agencies. Because our region is food poor in a manufacturing sense, the Foodbank must devise creative ways to meet the increasing demand from the agencies. "We get a lot of resources from the government," food solicitor Kristy Gilmore says. She's referring to USDA commodities, which provide staples such as meat, peanut butter, and beef stew. The shared maintenance fee is waived for commodities, as well as produce donated through the Plant-A-Row program and all bakery items.

Plans for our Foodbank grew as early as 1980, when representatives of cities throughout Central and Southern Illinois met. Some of the original Board of Governors came from Bloomington, Champaign, Charleston/Mattoon, Danville, Decatur, Jacksonville, Lincoln, Peoria, and Springfield. On October 13, 1981, sixteen committee members met at the Bloomington Public Library and approved a motion to consider establishing Central Illinois Foodbank at Brother James Court in Springfield, although Champaign/Urbana was still a possible location.

The Foodbank brewed out of a batch of stone soup. No one had all the ingredients to put a Foodbank together, but everyone contributed what they had. Peoria's Catholic diocese pledged a donation of three to five thousand dollars. A board member from Lincoln took on the task of gathering endorsements for grant money. Trades and Labor union representatives from Bloomington volunteered thousands of man-

hours for any skilled labor necessary on the warehouse, and Champaign-Urbana's Developmental Service Center offered to construct a warehouse on that property if the Springfield site fell through.

On June 17, 1981, Central Illinois Foodbank received a Not-For-Profit certification. Less than a year later, on February 25, 1982, Vern Fein, who

The Foodbank brewed from a batch of stone soup. No one had all the ingredients to put a Foodbank together, but everyone contributed what they had.

would be the first president of the Foodbank Board of Governors, signed the lease securing the Brother James site, and finally, on June 7, 1982, our doors officially opened to 42 central Illinois counties – a region of 25,000 square miles (an area greater than the combined totals of Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire). By the end of August over 9,000 lbs. of food had passed through the doors. The annual meeting in November 1982 reported 84 active agencies, with new applications rolling in at a rate of three to five per week. Among the Foodbank's equipment inventory, a few of the "begged or borrowed" items included an 18-foot 1969 Ford Model 600 truck, two desks, two typewriters, a file cabinet, and a 200 lb. capacity scale. The Foodbank was open and running, and that's what mattered.

The honeymoon didn't last long, but determination kept the doors open. A letter dated January 24, 1983, contains a note from Fein thanking Brother Raphael of Brother James Court for help when a flood had threatened product and equipment the previous

month. Fein and Brother Raphael had corresponded back and forth for two years, discussing everything from rent costs to modifications to the warehouse to dimensions of the coolers. Early in the planning stages, Fein had sent Brother Raphael an exhaustive letter outlining the warehouse needs for the Foodbank project. Through working together, and with the help of volunteers, staff, and donors, the Brother James Court facility became the first Foodbank site in central Illinois.

One person who gave extraordinary time and talent for our Foodbank was John Arnold. In April 1982, Arnold accepted the position of executive director at an annual salary of \$15,000. Reflecting back on his first year as a foodbanker, he wrote: "My first Foodbank [...] was the Central Illinois Foodbank in Springfield, IL. The staff was me. Our vehi-

cle was my little pick-up truck, and the building that housed our operations was such a mess that I spent nearly a week working on it with a coal shovel before I could use a broom or mop."

Although Arnold quickly organized and grew the organization, he resigned his position a year later. In his final report to the board he outlined both the accomplishments, as well as problems, the Foodbank was encountering. "At the staffing/volunteer level, the Foodbank is keeping its head above water in most respects [...] records and paperwork reasonably up-to-date." Most revealing is Arnold's statement that "staff are no longer feeling completely overwhelmed." Noted problems included cleanliness, inventory maintenance, and agency monitoring. The need for a Foodbank, however, was confirmed by the incredible demand for product. The millionth pound of donated food arrived on October 28, 1983, and the organization reached a monthly distribution rate of 75,000 pounds.

## ON THE ROAD

By 1985, Central Illinois Foodbank made headlines almost weekly. When Crosby, Stills, and Nash performed at Prairie Capitol Convention Center in July, Graham Nash recorded a radio spot urging concert attendees to bring a canned good to be donated to the Foodbank.

Hands Across America on May 25, 1986, eventually led to a donation of \$5000 to the Foodbank (a total of \$10,000 was given to feeding programs throughout the area). In a State-Journal Register article dated June 2, 1986, Foodbank director Jack Habig said he was hoping for funds to purchase a warehouse. He estimated the cost to run \$250,000. At that time, Central Illinois Foodbank's annual budget was only \$318,000.



The shifting location of the Foodbank warehouse is difficult to track. On July 5, 1984, Foodbank executive director Robert Hunt stated that while the warehouse will still be at Brother James, air-conditioned office space has been donated. A 1993 informational piece lists the Springfield address as 410 N. 19th Street, while by 1994 the locale address changes to 2000 E. Moffat Street. As a part of the former Barker Lubin complex, most likely the office space was at the entrance of the complex, while the warehouse was at the current location. When offices were added to the warehouse, the address of the Foodbank changed to 2000 E. Moffat Street, which intersects with 19<sup>th</sup> street.

In 1994 Foodbank director Jack Habig announced his retirement after eight and a half years heading the organization. Habig's replacement, Richard Knowlton, wasn't on the job a week before an incident threatened the facility, as well as the integrity, of the Foodbank.

## SURVIVING SCANDAL

According to newspaper accounts, on Thursday, August 4, 1994, a long time accountant for the Foodbank called police to report that she had been working late when she was attacked by intruders. Two men had forced their way into the building, tied the woman to a chair, cut her hair and clothes with box cutters, then set a fire that threatened the majority of the foodbank's financial records. Central Illinois Foodbank was scheduled to be audited the following Monday.

Inconsistencies in the woman's story raised suspicion, and she was eventually charged with arson and disorderly conduct for lying about the attack. The computer that held the Foodbank's records was able to be recovered, and in September Knowlton announced to the press that \$27,000 had been embezzled from the Foodbank. The former accountant later pled guilty to forging checks, and arson charges were subsequently dismissed.

The incident was, however, a small setback that did not cause the Foodbank to fall. An October article in the Illinois Times reported that the 1995 year saw 2.5 million pounds of food distributed. Quotes printed from new Foodbank executive director, Tracy Ryan, were promising. When asked about a peanut butter drive that secured 4,400 pounds of peanut butter – but still fell short of the goal – Ryan's optimism responded that the drive "was a great example of how the community can help food banks be effective in feeding those in need."

## NEW BEGINNINGS

The last half of the 1990s brought change and growth to Central Illinois Foodbank. The first Kids Cafe, funded through a United Way grant, opened on September 8, 1997, at the Springfield YWCA. Kids Cafe programs provide free meals and snacks to low-income children through a variety of existing community locations where children congregate such as Boys and Girls Clubs,

churches, and public schools. Two years later another Kids Cafe opened at Brandon Court. Operated in partnership with the Springfield Urban League, that cafe still operates daily to serve children who may not receive an evening meal otherwise.

Plant-A-Row volunteers made their first donation to the Foodbank in the spring of 1999, and have continued to support Central Illinois Foodbank since. When the weather begins to warm up agencies know that fresh fruits and vegetables from area gardens are not far behind. Plant-A-Row particularly benefits the hungry because often fresh foods are the most expensive – both at the grocery store and for the Foodbank to procure. Therefore, food insecure families and individuals often do not consume the necessary amount of fresh produce to maintain a healthy diet because they lack access to such nutrition. Thanks to Plant-A-Row, however, all summer long agencies receive produce to distribute to clients. In 2006 Plant-A-Row gardeners and volunteers donated 45,450 pounds of fruits and vegetables that were given to people throughout Central Illinois.

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“When the Foodbank is open, I believe we will think it’s all worth it.”

Vern Fein, November 11, 1981

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In October 2000 the Foodbank launched Food Rescue. The program’s first year budget, including start-up costs, was \$65,000. Restaurants and grocery stores donate untouched, prepared food that could not be used. Instead of such product going into dumpsters, Foodbank staff and volunteers collect the food to be given to the hungry. The Food Rescue program is a win-win deal for all involved: businesses are relieved of excess food that would be dumped, and agency clients enjoy a variety of delicious and nutritious meals. Because area businesses, the Foodbank, and local agencies cooperate, food that would be wasted is instead consumed.

At the same time that Kids Cafes, Plant-A-Row, and Food Rescue were taking off, the Foodbank’s general food distribution rates steadily grew. In 1996, the Foodbank made 3,683,000 pounds of food available to the community. Ten years later that number would grow by nearly a half a million pounds, and continues to increase. The Foodbank’s success lies in the efficiency of its operations, as current director Pam Molitoris believes. Molitoris took over the position in July 2003, and has taken the Foodbank to the most secure and successful place it’s been yet.

## LOOKING FORWARD

This week is the much awaited and thoroughly planned 25th Anniversary party, which conveniently coincides with Hunger Awareness Day. A last minute great idea pushed the party from the warehouse to the lawn on the east-side of the property. Now rain is predicted, followed by a lot of hand-wringing and e-mails verifying alternate plans if the clouds break. “We’ve got food, drinks, and a lot of great people coming,” Molitoris comforts staff already looking at the sky. “If it rains, we’ll deal with it.”

The planning of the silver anniversary ironically reflects the entire history of Central Illinois Foodbank. A group of staff, all who came from different places and chose to stay here, throw in talents to finish what needs to be done. Sudden flashes of panic erupt, (“We forgot to order the Porta-Potties!”) and are soon quelled by decisive action. Everyone contributes to the success of the event, encouraging each other, remembering the mission of the organization and working together in the same spirit. Hunger is 365 days a year; there’s a lot left to be done. There’s also a lot of positive change that’s worth celebrating as well. This Foodbank knows that barriers exist. But this Foodbank finds ways around them.

The dreams now parallel the hopes in the early years. Once again a new warehouse is creeping up on the need list. Demand for food constantly rises, especially in the rural areas. Fuel and freight costs have increased exponentially within the past decade, straining the food procurement budget. And like the early years, solutions are found each day because the staff, donors, volunteers, and agencies know that by working together, questions find answers. Need finds help. “I think that’s all for now. Linda [Kopecky], Les [Dean], and Kathy [Howell] will keep in close touch with you,” Vern Fein wrote to Brother Raphael in an exhaustive handwritten letter dated November 11, 1981. “Thank you again for your openness in dealing with us. When the Foodbank is open, I believe we will think it’s all worth it.”

Twenty-five years later, millions of pounds of food later, hundreds of thousands of hungry people fed later, we know that Vern Fein was right. Central Illinois Foodbank has been, and will continue to be, all worth it.

