

Coalition suggests six ways for churches to fight hunger

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DALLAS—Leaving a person alone to pull himself up by his own bootstraps matches neither the commands of every major world religion nor the reality of Americans trapped in poverty, a Baptist hunger advocate told an interfaith gathering in Dallas.



“All of our traditions insist we must work on behalf of the hungry in the world,” Jeremy Everett, director of the [Texas](#)

[Hunger Initiative](#), told a group of Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Muslims at an event sponsored by the [Dallas Coalition for Hunger Solutions](#).

The poor face a significant challenge in 21st century America, he insisted.

“There is less social mobility in our country than at any time since 1929,” he said, labeling the notion of a person independently being able to pull himself out of poverty “a myth” for most Americans in 2014.

However, Everett insisted, the faith community has a message of hope to offer, because it inspires people to stand with the poor and hungry. He recalled asking Gustavo Gutierrez, the Latin American theologian, what it means to live in solidarity with the poor.

“It means committing your life to their cause,” he replied.

Everett challenged people of faith in North Texas to commit themselves to

the cause of justice for the poor and hungry, dedicating themselves to ensuring that every person has access to three healthy meals a day.

The faith community team of the Dallas Coalition for Hunger Solutions, chaired by Jana Jackson of Dallas Baptist Association, presented six strategies to engage churches, synagogues and mosques in addressing the problem of hunger.

- **The Community Partner Program** enlists congregations to help low-income individuals and families apply for and manage their public benefits through an Internet site, www.yourtexasbenefits.org.

In Dallas County, one-third of the residents eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program do not receive benefits—about 223,000 people who are not receiving assistance, said Marc Jacobson, Dallas-area regional director for the Texas Hunger Initiative, a program launched by the Baylor University School of Social Work in cooperation with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.



Texas Hunger Initiative presentation at the Dallas Coalition for Hunger Solutions. Congregations support the Community Partner Program by providing a public-access computer with Internet service where individuals

can apply for benefits. The church may be a self-service site with a freestanding computer station or an assistance site, where trained volunteers help their neighbors navigate the application process.

Michael Flemons, associate pastor of [Zion Chapel Primitive Baptist Church in Lancaster](#), described the program as a way for churches to “meet the real needs of people” and demonstrate relevance in their communities.

- [The summer meals program](#), a federally funded U.S. Department of Agriculture child-nutrition assistance program, provides summertime meals for children and teenagers who receive free- or reduced-price meals during the school year.

One of four children in Texas is food insecure, which means they live in a household where the family may not always be able to count on meals from one day to the next, said Loretta Landry, child nutrition outreach specialist with the Texas Hunger Institute.

Of the 2.8 million Texas children who participate in free- or reduced-price meals during the school year, only 12 percent participate in summer meals, she noted.

Churches can participate in the program either by serving as a summer meals site or by adopting a site—providing volunteers to staff a site, increase awareness about summer meals programs or offering enrichment activities for students before or after meals.

When churches provide Vacation Bible School-style activities at summer meal sites, it increases participation and reduces the stigma some participants feel, she noted. While students may be reluctant to tell friends they are going to get a free meal, they do not hesitate to let their peers know where they can go play games or participate in arts and crafts.

- [The Community Distribution Partners](#) **program** provides a model for

increasing efficiency of food distribution in high-needs areas and leveraging community resources.



A recent study found that seniors at risk of hunger were 50 percent more likely to be diabetic, three times more likely to suffer from depression and 14 percent more likely to have high blood pressure. The partnership uses a “hub and spoke” distribution model. Crossroads Community Services, the urban outreach ministry of First United Methodist Church in Dallas, serves as the hub, obtaining nutritious food in bulk from the [North Texas Food Bank](#).

Churches, food pantries, community-based ministries and other partners throughout Dallas County serve as the spokes of the wheel. Volunteers from more than 50 sites pick up food at Crossroads Community Services and distribute it to clients at their locations.

In addition to being able to provide food at a deeply discounted rate—even lower than when purchased in small quantities directly from the food bank—partner sites also have access to educational resources through the hub and can provide workshops in their communities on nutrition and meal planning.

- [**The Cooking Matters program**](#) is a six-week course that teaches participants how to become smarter shoppers, make healthier nutritional choices and cook affordable meals.



The Dallas Coalition for Hunger Solutions' urban agriculture team supports the development of urban agriculture as an economic development tool and a way to improve access to fresh food. Share Our Strengths, an initiative of the [**No Kid Hungry**](#) campaign to end child hunger in the United States, sponsors Cooking Matters.

Congregations can serve as host sites for the classes, which meet for two hours once a week for six weeks. Church members also can teach grocery-shopping skills, members with food-service backgrounds can serve as volunteer chefs, and members with experience in dietetics can teach nutrition.

- [**The Family Garden Initiative**](#) helps churches and individuals teach their neighbors how to grow nutritious food in small backyard gardens.

The initiative provides mesh bags filled with soil and compost. Families

learn how to plant vegetables directly in those bags, which can be placed in any location that receives direct sunlight—even concrete surfaces. A garden planted with eight bags can produce enough food to feed a family of four for one year, and the bags can be used again with fresh planting for a second year.

Churches can sponsor a family garden for \$50, and volunteers can teach families how to plant, water and harvest their vegetables.

- [**Meals on Wheels**](#) delivers nutritious, freshly prepared meals to people who cannot provide for themselves due to advanced age, illness or disability.

In addition to helping meet the nutritional needs of the elderly and disabled, the regular visits by volunteers also meet socialization needs of people who otherwise may be isolated.

Churches can enlist and coordinate volunteers to deliver meals.