

# The Ties that Bind

## Feeding the Hungry in a Land of Plenty

by Kim Thomas

Perhaps you've heard this tale. There is a picturesque village on a river. One day, villagers notice a baby floating down the river. They rush into the water to rescue the baby. The next day, they see another baby floating down the river. Once again, they rush in to rescue the baby. Each day following, more babies come floating down the river. Each day, the villagers rescue the babies. They begin arranging "intake" centers where villagers provide food, clothing, health care, and adoption services. For days and then months the rescuing goes on at a fevered pitch. The villagers stop performing their normal, everyday activities and immerse themselves in the business of saving babies. One day, one villager peers upriver, and asks, "Where do these babies come from? Shouldn't someone go upriver and try to stop whoever is throwing them in?" His fellow villagers suspend their work briefly. They tell him his question is a good one, but they are all too busy tending to the babies. If they let someone go, they reason, a baby may go unfed, or get sick, or even die. No, they cannot look for the source right now. They need to keep rescuing the babies.

I first heard this fable eight years ago when I began working at the Oregon Food Bank. A Catholic priest who ran a small emergency food box program began a speech with this tale. For those of us listening carefully, the speech delineated the difference between charity and justice. I was the communications coordinator for the food bank at the time, spending my days calling TV and radio stations and asking them to cover the latest food drive or special event designed to raise food and funds, so that the food bank could reach more people. Since those early days at the food bank, when the light bulb came on for me, I have been gratified to see the organization's light bulb come on as well.

Our board of directors created a two-part mission statement: first, to eliminate hunger and its root causes. Second, to educate the public and policymakers, and to advocate for policy changes that identify and address these root causes of hunger and poverty. Unfortunately, as the number of people suffering from hunger increases, the Oregon Food Bank's efforts at attacking the causes is, inevitably, side-tracked.

One day in the fall, I sat in a room full of advocates, service providers and state bureaucrats and looked at a map of Multnomah County. Blue areas on the map represented all the communities where 50 percent or more of school-age children qualified for a free or reduced-price school lunch. These are families earning up to 185 percent of the federal poverty line, or \$30,433 a year for a family of four. The entire area east of the Willamette River was bright blue, except for a few small patches. The room fell silent as we all tried

to soak it in. In a huge portion of Multnomah County, the county with some of the best economic prospects in the state in 1998, 50 percent or more of our school children could not afford to pay for a school lunch (about \$1.35 a day).

We were told that maps of the 35 other counties in Oregon were being produced and that the situation would not look much better, particularly in counties with large rural areas. A state legislator, who has been a staunch supporter of funding for human services, wondered how we could make other legislators and even our Congressional delegation understand the magnitude of this information, particularly in a time when for many of us dividends were paying well and a Christmas bonus was a sure thing.

A 1998 survey of emergency food box recipients showed that the number of people who received food stamps fell by 17 percent during the previous two years. More startling is the fact that 71 percent of adults surveyed cut the size of their own meals or skipped meals because they did not have enough money for food, and 15 percent of households with children cut the size of their children's meals or skipped meals because they did not have enough money to buy food.

A recent article in the *Oregonian* concluded that "workers in both the high-technology and forest-products industries are facing an increasingly painful lesson in world economics as the Asian financial crisis eats away at profits in both industries." The article highlights several workers from both industries who have had to readjust. A former logger, who, according to the *Oregonian*, was making \$12.79 an hour until he was laid off, is one of the lucky ones: "He has since found a job working in a veneer mill for \$8.65 per hour." According to this "lucky" worker, who just landed a 32 percent pay cut and must commute an extra 50 miles to and from work, "Working full time in that mill with a family of four, ... [we] qualify for \$240 a month in food stamps."

In the absence of sound public policy, responsible and caring community folks in Oregon have built, from the ground up, a highly efficient and helpful food bank system. In fact it is one of the best food bank systems in the country. A total of 401,000 Oregonians (equal to one in eight) received emergency food from the food bank system this past year. From 1997 to 1998 (two years after President Clinton signed the welfare reform bill into law), 17,000 more people, a five percent increase statewide, needed help. Some parts of the state experienced even more dramatic increases. In the Portland metropolitan area, where unemployment is the lowest in the state, 8.5 percent more people sought food. LaGrande experienced the greatest increase: 25 percent.

Of the twenty regional food banks  
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Photos courtesy of the Oregon Food Bank

economy. During this period the percentage of Oregonians living on or below the poverty level has remained at 12 percent.

The problems of helping those still on the welfare rolls in Oregon are illustrated by several statistics: two-thirds have mental health problems, one-half admit substance abuse, and one-half claim they have been beaten or sexually abused. Oregon's cost per case has risen 28 percent.

More bad news comes from a Children's Defense Fund report that shows poverty puts children at greater risk than being born to teenage parents or growing up in a single parent family. The risks include life-long poverty, unemployment, teen births, low birth weight, infant mortality, lead poisoning, neglect, addiction, HIV/AIDS and subjection to violent crime.

Meanwhile, the state is spending 20 percent less than its historic funding of welfare services for those eligible for TANF. Surplus funds from declining case loads have been diverted to the state's general fund, where they may be used for non-welfare services. MOE levels for block grants have been met by including payments for services to the unemployed who are diverted to JOBS Plus but do not qualify for TANF. This was not the intent of the federal waivers and appears to be an attempt to link the regular unemployment program with the JOBS program.

### Oregon's Earned Income Credit and Working Family Credit

Under JOBS, when a welfare family's new wage earner begins to earn unsubsidized wages, he or she quickly loses TANF. Co-payments for child care kick in at the same time and may lower the family's income even if the income falls below the federal poverty level.

Introduced in 1997, the Earned Income Credit (EIC) and the Working Family Credit (WFC) were intended to help working parents remain free of the need for cash assistance once they have taken jobs. Neither made it through the legislature intact. As of this writing the WFC does not benefit the lowest wage earners in Oregon. The current complexities of filling out the tax forms for the EIC exclude many who are eligible from benefiting. There is some bipartisan sentiment in the legislature that those paid the least

should benefit the most from tax breaks and receive refundable credits for child care beyond their tax liabilities. Oregon is one of 24 states that still collects income taxes from the working poor.

### Oregon's Minimum Wage

Oregon has the second highest minimum wage in the country. However, the state's wage-related eligibility standards have not been formulated to encourage those on assistance to work. More families have been denied services each time the minimum wage has risen.

### Manpower and the Critics

The MDRC report, released in 1998, actually evaluated a program which in 1996 had encouraged participants to wait for good jobs above the minimum wage. Though touted as the poster child for welfare reform, our current program requires participants to take the first minimum-wage job available. It also no longer requires employers participating in JOBS Plus to show a commitment to hire and it mandates a 30-day job search in advance of enrolling for services. Some providers complain that they are losing up to one third of their potential cases because people in need are intimidated by work requirements.

Meanwhile, many welfare reform advocates are crowing that the work ethic is returning to the poor in this country. They cite many true stories of long-term welfare clients succeeding in the workforce. In Oregon a first wave of welfare clients has moved easily into low paying jobs created by a robust economy; and many people, under JOBS, are gaining work experience that should help qualify them for better jobs in the future. For the time being, a few more Oregonians are living their lives closer to the federal poverty line rather than well below it. However, one question begs to be answered: what will happen when the economy in Oregon falters?

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and 650 local member programs (food pantries, shelters, group homes, soup kitchens) that cover every county in the state, the Oregon Food Bank is the hub. Regional food banks, particularly those in rural areas, struggle to find more food in communities with few resources, and small food pantries in church basements gather food and face the daunting challenge of re-energizing an aging, over-used volunteer workforce in order to keep their doors open.

Upon hearing that a large social service agency might close its doors if the demand gets much higher, our director, in a fit of frustration, announced that what we really need to do is encourage all our member programs to close their doors for one day. They should put a sign on their doors that says, "If you need help, call your member of Congress." Hundreds, maybe even thousands of people might call their elected officials on that day and say, "I'm hungry. My family is out of food. We do not have enough money to go to the store. You need to help us now."

One small way in which our legislature could help to alleviate hunger in Oregon is to increase the state's earned income tax credit. During the 1997 session, lawmakers passed a limited state earned income tax credit to help the working poor keep more of their hard-earned dollars. The Oregon Food Bank's statewide network and many partners in the advocacy community worked hard to get that bill passed. It is only a small step, however. As proud as its supporters are of this bill, it needs to benefit more people than it does. The increased work load of the people at the Oregon Food Bank indicates that the stakes have risen. The legislature needs to address the causes of poverty rather than rely on the good will of a few Oregonians to solve the problem of hunger in Oregon.

#### Source

"Laid-off tech, timber workers face similar fates," the *Portland Oregonian*, September 6, 1998.

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