

Food insecurity is a growing problem across the nation. Food security is a federal measure of a household's ability to provide enough food for every person in the household to have an active, healthy life. Food insecurity is one way to measure the risk of hunger. Currently in the United States, 1 in 8 people struggle with hunger.<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity can cause individuals and families to make extremely difficult choices between buying food and paying bills. These choices can affect the ability of children to learn and grow, the ability of seniors to seek critical healthcare, and can cause health complications for people of all ages.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, 41.2 million people lived in food- insecure households in 2016. 10.8 million adults lived in households with very little food security and 6.5 million children lived in food-insecure households.<sup>2</sup> This problem is widespread and affects urban, suburban, and rural households. Public libraries are increasingly stepping up to assist in combatting food insecurity in their communities by collaborating with national and regional organizations that fight hunger.

In partnership with agencies who are addressing hunger in America, libraries can help raise awareness about the issue, conduct food drives through programs such as 'food for fines,' host summer meal programs in partnership with local school districts, serve as a food bank distribution site, hosting farmer's markets or mobile pantries, conduction nutrition education programs to teach people how to shop and prepare healthy, low cost meals, and more.

An important initial step can be educating library staff about the realities of living with food insecurity. Programs such as Poverty Simulations and Hunger 101 simulations are helpful training exercises that help library staff better understand the difficulties of navigating complicated government agencies, the challenges of purchasing healthy food on a very limited budget, and the emotional distress caused by food insecurity.

At the [Southern Tier Library System](#), we recently hosted the Community Education Coordinator from the Food Bank of the Southern Tier, to conduct a Hunger 101 education session during our day-long Summer Learning Workshop. Our goal was to encourage local libraries to integrate Summer Meal programs into their summer programming. Some of our local libraries already collaborate with school districts to host these programs or promote them, but we wanted to do more to emphasize their importance. We also wanted library staff members to understand the realities of food insecurity and be able to empathize with library patrons and community members who live with hunger as a daily reality.

[The Food Bank of the Southern Tier](#) is a part of the [Feeding America](#) network, the nation's largest domestic hunger-relief organization. In 2017, Feeding America distributed more than 3.6 billion meals to people in need through their nationwide network of food banks.<sup>3</sup> Feeding America maintains 200 foodbanks across America which serve large areas and work with small, local food banks and food pantries.

The Hunger 101 program, which about 30 library staff members participated in, is an interactive workshop that explores the realities of hunger and poverty in the local community. The program can be

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/what-is-hunger-and-food-insecurity.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.alastore.ala.org/content/promoting-individual-and-community-health-library>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.feedingamerica.org/our-work/food-bank-network.html>

personalized for youth and / or adults. Through participation in the program, library staff learned about the causes, consequences, and responses to hunger and poverty. Participants reported positive experiences after completing the workshop, stating that they better understood the difficulties in the lives of people facing food insecurity. Many participants talked about the empathy they felt for the people who have to navigate complicated processes and agencies to attempt to get help and the surprise they felt at experiencing how difficult it was to seek help.

By enabling our library staff members to have this experience, we believe we have better equipped them to serve people in their communities and to provide resources and programs designed to assist in fighting hunger. In working with The Food Bank of the Southern Tier, we created a partnership which we will continue to strengthen as our library system works to meet its goal of empowering our 48 public libraries to provide amazing and impactful services in our communities and the Food Bank of the Southern Tier works to build and sustain hunger-free communities throughout our region.