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Groups Help Fill Bellies

[By Eric Billingsley](#)

Journal Staff Writer

Today the Journal begins its annual Help for the Holidays series, which spotlights areas of need in our community. The stories will be published over the next four Sundays.

Kimberly Gallegos works as a caregiver 32 hours a week, takes classes at Central New Mexico Community College with hopes of earning a college degree and often relies on soup kitchens to make ends meet.

The 37-year-old single mother of three says getting ahead seems impossible at times.

"I live in a constant state of survival," says Gallegos. "The present is so difficult and the future seems unattainable. My work skills encompass manual labor, and, even though I'm trying to get educated in college, it's difficult to do in a poverty state."

Gallegos' story isn't uncommon for working families in the Albuquerque metro area, many of which have full- or part-time wage earners but live below the poverty level.

"A lot of families (that) food agencies serve are people working in the service industry making minimum wage and having to support a family. Some are working two jobs to make ends meet, and some are working but homeless," says Art Fine, director of programs for Roadrunner Food Bank, one of many local agencies in need of financial help and volunteers. "There are these people all over town."

More than 80,000 people age 16 and older living in Bernalillo, Sandoval, Valencia and Torrance counties have incomes below the poverty level, according to current census statistics compiled by the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of New Mexico. Of that number, 30,395 are employed.

The rising cost of living makes it even harder for working families. From October 2006 to October 2007, energy costs rose nationwide 14.5 percent, food costs increased 4.4 percent, housing 3.1 percent and medical care 4.8 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers.

'A real hardship'

Dezra Noel, a 35-year-old single mother of four, is an on-call backstage crew member for theater productions and relies on social services and local food pantries to help keep her family fed. She says another challenge for working families that receive social services is that there's almost a disincentive to work.

"That's a real hardship. The income levels they allow you are so far below poverty," says Noel. She says that, if she works full-time, she loses benefits important to her family's well-being. "If I had no job and sat on my butt and collected full benefits, I would have all the time in the world."

Agencies that provide food for working families need donations and volunteers year-round.

A recent Associated Press story said that a U.S. Department of Agriculture report on hunger shows that 16 percent of New Mexico households worry about having enough food to eat. New Mexico ranks as the second highest in the nation for so-called food insecurity, with the national average being 10.9 percent.

An estimated one in four New Mexico children lives in a household where they don't always know where their next meal is coming from, according to America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest charitable hunger-relief organization.

"(Hunger) is a very deplorable situation," says Fine. "And the problem is not getting any better in New Mexico."

Roadrunner Food Bank partners with 600 agencies and five regional food banks statewide, and distributes 65,000 pounds of food each working day. It is the main source of food for local soup kitchens and pantries.

The organization also has a number of specialized initiatives. The Emergency Food for Families program distributes food boxes to 23 community organizations. The boxes provide enough food for a family of four to eat for two days and a resource guide that lists shelters, food sources, job opportunities and more.

The Food for Kids Backpack Program provides food for 3,100 school-age children at 35 schools every week in a five-county area. And the Senior Helpings Program provides seniors who are struggling financially one supplemental meal per day for 30 days.

Roadrunner needs financial contributions to purchase fresh and healthy foods, nonperishable food donations and volunteers to work in the Albuquerque warehouse, according to Jasmin Holmstrup of Roadrunner.

A few local organizations that provide hot meals and other services to families in need include Noon Day Ministry, St. Martin's Hospitality Center, Good Shepherd Center and the Albuquerque Rescue Mission. All need volunteers and financial contributions.

'Meet and eat'

Gallegos says organizations like Noon Day Ministry provide her family with some semblance of stability. "It's a place to meet and eat," she says. "I've spent days at Noon Day. It's my family and my constant."

Advocacy and community organizations also need support. Some local groups working on poverty-related issues include 1000 Friends of New Mexico, New Mexico Voices for Children, ACORN, SouthWest Organizing Project, the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness and the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice.

Agencies that feed working families and others are invaluable, says Gabriel Nims, executive director of 1000 Friends of New Mexico. But affordable housing, access to health care, wages, crime, environmental issues and education are also part of the larger picture.

"There are not equal opportunities to respect the needs of all families," says Nims. 1000 Friends and other advocacy groups help working families and the community by working to change political and economic policies, he says.

A couple of 1000 Friends' initiatives include helping to create high-quality affordable housing in

Albuquerque and promoting growth and development in the city that emphasize stronger, safer and more walkable neighborhoods.

People can get involved by making a financial contribution to 1000 Friends, volunteering for office and research work and directly participating in grass-roots campaigns, says Nims.

"We feel like the advocacy work is really taking place at the kitchen table," says Nims. "With us providing the service of educating and engaging people on these issues, these ideas are being talked about amongst family members and friends."

Contact information

1000 Friends of New Mexico

848-8232 1000friends-nm.org

ACORN

242-7411 acorn.org

Albuquerque Rescue Mission

346-4673 abqrescue.org

Good Shepherd Center

243-2527 gs-center.com

New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness

505-982-9000 (Santa Fe) nmceh.org

New Mexico Voices for Children

244-9505 nmvoices.org

Noon Day Ministry

246-8001 noondayministry.org

Roadrunner Food Bank of New Mexico

Non-perishable food donations: 247-2052

Financial contributions: 349-8670, or visit rrfb.org

To volunteer at the warehouse: Patty Gillis, 349-8825

St. Martin's Hospitality Center

242-4399 smhc-nm.org

Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice

242-0416 sneej.org

SouthWest Organizing Project

247-8832 swop.net