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Ending Hunger Must Go Beyond Providing The Next Meal

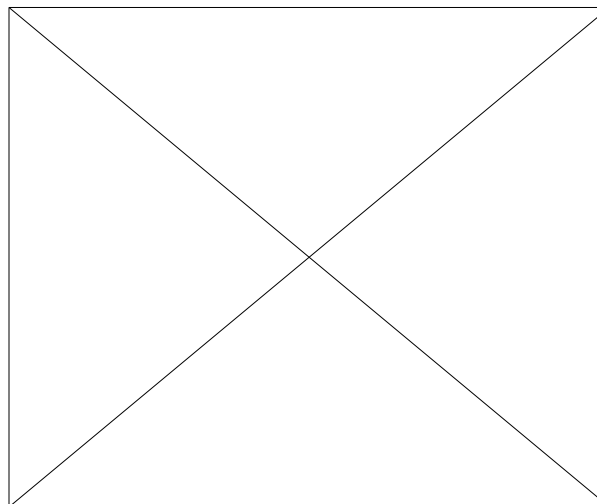
Susan Campbell

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Not long ago, I got a phone call from a woman named Loretta, a mother of two who lives in Hartford. Loretta works full-time at a manufacturing company, has a car that runs and serves on every committee but one at her church.

Every evening, there's a warm meal on the table. Loretta says she's blessed.

But lately, she's hit a snag. An hour or so before dinner, sometimes one, sometimes three neighborhood children start showing up at her door. They don't ask for anything, but they look and act hungry, and they certainly eat the food she sets in front of them.



Loretta knows that her neighbors can't feed their kids right now, and she can, but those spare mouths may send Loretta to a food bank to supplement her pantry. She's a church-going woman, she says. She can't refuse those kids.

When Katie Martin, a research associate at the University of Connecticut's Center for Public Health and Health Policy, was earning her doctorate from Tufts University, she studied low-income families in Hartford and how they acquire food. Relying on neighbors — as Loretta's do — played a sizable role in stretching a thin budget, she says. What author Robert Putnam calls social capital — the ties that bind us together — is important in good nutrition; Martin found that the more connected a family is to their neighbors and neighborhood, the less likely they are to go hungry. They can borrow a car or send their children to a neighbor's. (Putnam comes to Hartford to speak on Feb. 14, courtesy of Hands on Hartford, formerly known as Center City Churches.)

Loretta wouldn't change her good-neighbor reputation, but when will we stop looking to private individuals to repair our broken food system? It's a question that plagues Gloria McAdam, president and CEO of Foodshare, Inc., the region's food bank that last year handed out 10.5 million pounds of food, and one that Mark Winne, formerly of Hartford Food System, explores in his book, "Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty." (Winne will speak at Foodshare's annual meeting on March 6.)

By every measure, Foodshare is a success. It has a stellar reputation and caring leadership — but it only fulfills, says McAdam, about a third of the area's need. And only a tiny fraction of the food comes from the ever-popular food drives.

The policy and advocacy group End Hunger CT proposes a three-year plan to make good food more accessible to people who need it. Its plan includes offering lunches and breakfasts in every school and getting more people who qualify to sign up for food stamps. At present, only 60 percent of those who would qualify receive the benefit. McAdam says the government carries the bulk of the load — 94 percent — when it comes to food distribution to low-income people, and the food-stamp program is their biggest distribution program. Increasing enrollment to 65 percent would equal the amount of food Foodshare distributed last year, McAdam says.

And all those volunteers who want to donate canned food or a turkey? Martin suggests that they call, instead, Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters, maybe volunteer to teach someone to read. Or go to United Way and become a budget coach. Call up Habitat for Humanity and pick up a hammer. Handing out a free meal lasts precisely as long as it takes for the next meal to roll around. Just ask Loretta. She says she doesn't want a hand-out. She'd rather see her neighbors get back on their feet.

If we're going to spend our energy, let's do it where it has the most impact. End Hunger CT wants to help low-income families achieve greater economic security. Hunger is poverty's child. Help a household become self-sufficient, and hunger becomes a thing of the past.

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