

## Schafer: Firms take a business approach to hunger

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The Hennepin County Medical Center serves about 1,500 families each month with an emergency food shelf called the therapeutic food pharmacy.

A pediatrician who helped launch it described it as mostly a group of volunteers who pack bags with inexpensively purchased or donated food and drop them off at clinics and departments in the big downtown Minneapolis medical center.

This relatively humble effort recently got an innovation grant from a statewide group called Hunger-Free Minnesota, as the medical center's operation is one of the nation's few food shelves operated by a hospital.

Some of the other 19 recipients of grants were planning to use Hunger-Free's new Community Close-Up data analysis tool. Developed by the Boston Consulting Group as a \$600,000 in-kind donation, the tool drills into census tract data to help food shelf managers and others determine the best way to reach the people who are hungry in a community.

Fostering innovation and the use of data analysis are hallmarks of Hunger-Free Minnesota in its three-year campaign to increase the capacity of the food system to eliminate a gap of 100 million missing meals in the state. That businesslike approach may explain why Hunger-Free Minnesota's principal support comes from the Fortune 500 neighborhood of the Twin Cities business community, with Cargill and General Mills on board. General Mills just doubled its support with a new \$1 million grant.

Another key early corporate partner, also in with a million-dollar grant, is Minnetonka-based UnitedHealth Group. That shows how Hunger-Free Minnesota has also managed to make the conversation about more than just food. Said Ellie Lucas, the chief campaign officer of Hunger-Free Minnesota: "We need to lift this up and out of being just a food company problem and look at the other strategies that are available, and other resources."

Hunger-Free Minnesota calls itself a "campaign," because its work is to be wrapped up by the start of 2015. While Lucas likes to say that Hunger-Free "takes a business approach to a social problem," its origins go back to 2008 and the work of the nonprofit Second Harvest Heartland.

Second Harvest is a Maplewood-based nonprofit food bank that serves as more or less a food wholesaler for food shelves and soup kitchens located in a 59-county area of Minnesota and western Wisconsin.

The insight of Second Harvest and its CEO, Rob Zeaske, was to make the problem of not having enough food look more like a business problem and less like a perpetual social problem. The key to that was data.

Second Harvest turned to the University of Minnesota to come up with an estimate of what it called the "missing meals." The resulting conclusion was that each of the state's 956,000 low-income people was missing, on average, 10 meals a month.

While the total number was big in the first study, at over 100 million missing meals annually, the report still resonated with the businesspeople who discussed Hunger-Free Minnesota with me this past week.

Alleviate poverty? Impossible. Too big of a problem. Finding ways in just three years to completely fill in over 100 million meals? That may be doable.

After Hunger-Free Minnesota was created in early 2010, the Minneapolis office of the global consulting firm Boston Consulting Group put together a detailed business plan that was carried into meetings with executives at places like Cargill and General Mills.

It was a multifaceted plan, from saving agricultural surplus about to be plowed under to increasing enrollment in government nutrition programs.

It made sense to pitch top food companies like Cargill or General Mills. Kim Nelson, senior vice president of external relations for General Mills and the head of its foundation, said for a company with nourishing lives in its mission statement, the size of the missing meals gap in the company's home state was "intolerable."

Hunger-Free Minnesota also found a receptive audience at UnitedHealth.

Kate Rubin, vice president of social responsibility and head of its foundation, said as a health care insurer the company has an interest in improving health, particularly by helping manage obesity and diabetes. And she notes that hungry adults are twice as likely to be diabetic and three times more likely to be obese.

Hunger-Free Minnesota's approach appealed to UnitedHealth's interest in fostering innovation, too. "The other thing I really liked was the premise," she said. "We have enough food out there" to fill in the gap.

Diana Becker Cutts, a pediatrician at Hennepin County Medical Center, is encouraged that health care companies like UnitedHealth are jumping into the issue. As she put it, "they ought to be."

Cutts is a practicing physician who saw underweight babies and toddlers. She saw older kids with health problems including obesity, and she still finds that people have a hard time connecting obesity to the problem of not having enough food.

"If you look at the foundations of health, nutrition is a big part," she said. "The population that is the biggest utilizer of health care services is the same population that is most likely to be food insecure."

The \$50,000 grant from Hunger-Free Minnesota will expand the therapeutic food pharmacy to other departments including three to four other HCMC clinics outside of its main campus in downtown Minneapolis, and in the process create a plan to reduce food costs.

When looking at the task of planning for HCMC's food program to get bigger and more efficient, Cutts said she would welcome the help of businesspeople. She said she knows how to plan and budget for research projects, not write business plans for food distribution.

She is reminded of the recurring scenes in the original "Star Trek" television show where the character Dr. Leonard McCoy, in a moment of exasperation at what he's been asked to do, shouts at Captain Kirk that "I'm a doctor!" and not some sort of miracle worker or engineer.

"I'm a doctor," Cutts said. "There is a lot of expertise we need."

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