Putting a Face on Hunger

By David S. Broder

David O'Sullivan, the coordinator of the Community Soup Kitchen in New Haven, Conn., for the past 15 years, says it simply. "I've never seen so many people in need of food. In the wealthiest state of the wealthiest nation, there are thousands of poor and working people that rely upon food pantries and soup kitchens to help meet their most basic needs, and the numbers in my state are only rising."

Nancy Callaway of Tulsa has a different story to tell. "I'm an artist," she says, "and for the last three years I've donated my work to the food bank's 'empty bowl' fundraiser. I never expected to need their services myself, but last year I hurt myself on the job and was eventually laid off. With no money coming in, I had to turn to a pantry for the first time in my life, and realized that if it could happen to me, it could happen to anyone."

They were two of the many people who came, representing every state, to a basement room at the Washington, D.C., Central Kitchen two weeks ago to put a human face on the "scandal" of hunger in America.

That was the term used by Rep. Tony Hall of Ohio, the veteran Democrat and social activist who is leaving the House to become U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization. Representatives of the White House, the Agriculture Department, the food industry and others echoed his indignation: But it was the testimony of the grass-roots representatives that really made the point.

How is it, they asked, in this nation where obesity is a serious public health problem, that so many of our fellow citizens can be hurting for food? It is an unseen crisis. Jody Henderson recalled her days in the Air Force, a quarter-century ago, when she worked with returning Vietnam POWs "whose experience with hunger was profound and unrelenting—some for up to seven years." Now, as nutrition director for the Mississippi Health Department, "I work with citizens of the nation's most obese state, where hunger is camouflaged and misunderstood."

The event was arranged by Second Harvest, the largest hunger relief organization in the country, whose affiliate agencies fed 23 million people last year. The purpose of the gathering was to remind the nation that the recession and the aftereffects of Sept. 11 have increased the demands on food banks at the same time the flow of corporate and individual support has diminished.

Judy Carter, who runs the food bank in Austin, Tex., and organized the "Call to Action" two weeks ago, says the national need is for an extra million pounds of purchased or donated food a day—more than a 20 percent increase over current federal and private supplies.

That sounds impossible, but as Kathleen DiChiara, New Jersey's food bank director, notes, in the first few days after the attack on the World Trade Center, "two million pounds of disaster supplies from across the country came through our food bank." Since then, she says, "the need for food in our area has increased 18 percent. Americans cared back then, and I believe they will care again."

HER CONFIDENCE IS WIDELY SHARED AMONG those with personal involvement in the feeding programs. Jerry Tippets of Nehalem, Ore., a retired journalist, says he has seen his food bank increase its supply from 20 million pounds a year to 47 million in the past decade, strengthening his determination "to eliminate hunger and its root causes."

Ginette Bott of Salt Lake City told how her company's employees had gone from 800 pounds of food collected in their first drive, nine years ago, to 213,000 pounds last year. "Now we are trying to educate other Utahans to our state's hunger needs, and challenging their companies to do what we do," she says.

Tony Hall, a hero to the anti-hunger movement, told the assembled workers, "Our problem is not a lack of concern. We just need to tell people this is going on, that there are children going to bed hungry. The leaders of your community just need to come to your food kitchens and pantries. Change their hearts, and you will change this country."

The need is there—as these men and women testified—on Indian reservations, in rural America, in high-tech suburbs and in big cities. If you do what Hall suggests, you will find it in your own community—and learn how you can help.