



Michael Halligan
wants to change
stereotypes
associated
with hunger.



A HUNGER TO HELP

FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS GOD'S PANTRY FOOD BANK HAS DISTRIBUTED FOOD TO NEEDY KENTUCKIANS AND CAMPAIGNED TO INCREASE AWARENESS OF DOMESTIC HUNGER

By Terri Darr McLean / Photos by Jonathan Palmer

NOT LONG AFTER MICHAEL J. HALLIGAN took over as CEO of God's Pantry Food Bank in January, on the Friday before the Super Bowl he rolled up his sleeves and helped distribute food at St. Luke United Methodist's food bank in Lexington. It was there he met a family — a mother, father, and young son — picking up food.

When Halligan asked the family what brought them to the food bank, their answer was striking — but not surprising.

"All they wanted was to have a nutritious meal with their son and enjoy the Super Bowl," Halligan said. "They were just looking to be normal. That's all they're looking for.

"The stereotype of hunger is often a homeless male that has some form of addiction or medical issue who is unable to care for himself," he added. "The reali-

ty is that it is a cross-section of the fabric of our communities — it's neighbors that we may not even know are at risk of being hungry."

In the 50 Central and Eastern Kentucky counties served by God's Pantry, the number of people "looking to be normal" in the face of hunger is likewise striking. More than 750,000 Kentuckians (one in seven) live in poverty and are at risk of hunger, including 318,000 people in the Central and Eastern Kentucky counties served by God's Pantry. More than half of those served are children and senior citizens.

Since 1955, the hunger relief agency has been trying to reduce those numbers, working with numerous pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and other community service agencies that have similar missions. Together, they operate about 400 programs, including the popular school Backpack and

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Dock coordinator William Johnson moves a shipment of goods to the loading area of the God's Pantry warehouse.

Kids Café supplemental food programs, as well as soup kitchens and food banks.

Their clients include the working poor — 60 percent earn less than \$10,000 per year; the uneducated — 44 percent have less than a high school education; and the sick — 71 percent say they are unable to work because of a disability or poor health.

Of those served by God's Pantry, a majority reported having to make tough choices when it comes to buying food. Seventy-four percent of households had to choose between paying for food and paying for medicine or medical care; 68 percent had to choose between paying for food and paying for transportation.

“Seeing” the need

Beyond the numbers, of course, lies the real story — or, at least, its human angle. And it would be remiss not to begin that story with the woman who was among the first to see the significant need in Lexington.

Growing up in Kentucky's second-largest city, however, Mim Hunt lived a life isolated from its impoverished population. Only when she married and moved with her husband to New York City



God's Pantry COO Manuel Howard, center, meets with potential donors.

did she come face to face with poverty. After her husband died and she remarried, Hunt returned to Lexington with a “new set of eyes,” said Halligan.

“When she came back, she realized that poverty does exist in Lexington ... that there is hunger here,” said Halligan, who began

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his tenure at God's Pantry following the departure of longtime CEO Marian Guinn.

So Hunt set out to do something about it. She loaded up the family station wagon and began distributing food to some of the neediest Lexington residents. Out of the back of that station wagon, with donations from an Episcopal bishop, God's Pantry Food Bank was born. (It's been said that Hunt's connection with the bishop led to naming it God's Pantry, although the organization has no religious affiliation.)

"I think that story is just as relevant today as it was in 1955," Halligan said. "It's easy not to realize your next-door neighbor may be hungry because they don't have a job, because they have a large student loan, or because they have an unplanned medical expense ... It's easy to look past it and not even see it."

"I think there's a social stigma that's often attached to a person who is at risk of being hungry," he continued. "And if that social stigma influences our perception, we may choose to believe that there aren't issues like that. Trying to recognize the social stigma, being uncomfortable and moving past that was probably the 'a-ha' moment for Mim. It needs to be the 'a-ha' moment for all of us."



PHOTO BY Z/KEENELAND

At the Keeneland Kids Club annual Easter Egg Hunt, participants are encouraged to bring canned goods to donate to God's Pantry.

What's more, Halligan said common misconceptions make it all the more difficult to see hunger for what it really is.

"It's a single mom with two kids trying to work two jobs to make ends meet. It's a senior citizen on a fixed income who faces an es-

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<p>SAT 11.11</p> <p>CB SQUARED! 7:30pm, Singletary Center for the Arts ROSSINI, Overture to the Barber of Seville STRAVINSKY, Pulcinella Suite VAUGHAN WILLIAMS, The Wasps Overture CHRIS BRUBECK, Concerto for Brass and Orchestra Canadian Brass</p>	<p>FRI 2.9</p> <p>REVOLUTION! 7:30pm, Singletary Center for the Arts SHOSTAKOVICH, Symphony No. 7 "Leningrad"</p>
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Volunteers are important for two reasons. One, they provide you with the resources to sort, organize, and prepare products for distribution. Two, they help build awareness of the work. So what we find is that our volunteers are some of our best advocates because they experience the work and they can share the story from their own point of view.”

— MICHAEL J. HALLIGAN

calating cost of living with less resources available to them today than they’ve had in the past,” he said. “It’s someone with an unexpected medical condition and not enough savings to make ends meet. It’s a business person who’s lost their job, has no savings to live on, and finds themselves in a very different situation they’d never dreamed they’d be in. It’s a young adult with a sizable stu-

dent loan and no job coming out of college.”

Hunger disproportionately affects children and seniors. Particularly vulnerable are children, Halligan said, because of the importance of nutrition to learning and the lifelong effects when hunger prevails.

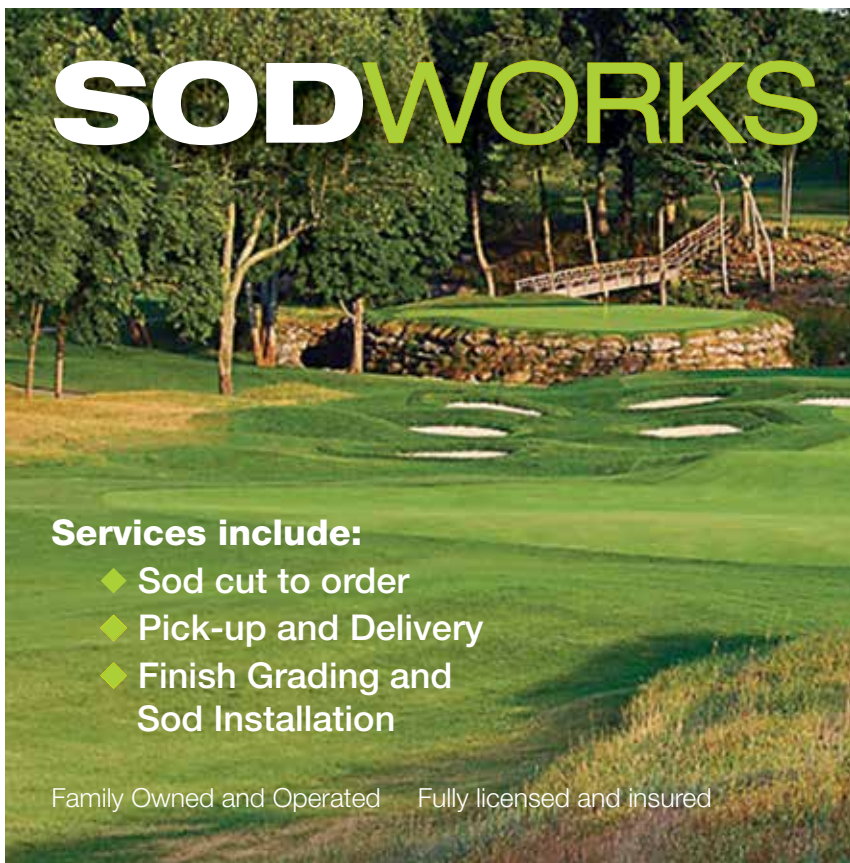
“Providing a nutritious array of food helps a person learn, which helps them prepare for working life when they reach adulthood. They’re living in poverty and with education added to their skill set, they’re better able to break that cycle,” he said.

Halligan tearfully recalled a time while working for Feeding America, the nationwide network of food banks, when he visited a Kids Café in Iowa for its grand opening. After the ribbon cutting, a 7-year-old he called “Kay” handed Halligan a hand-drawn picture of buttered toast in a frame.

“I looked at Kay and said thank you. But Kay said to me, ‘No, thank you. Because of the food I get, I do better in school.’ I thought I knew what hunger relief was about — until then,” Halligan said.

A force for good

God’s Pantry Food Bank has a staff of 58, but much of the work



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GOD'S PANTRY BY THE NUMBERS

29.9
MILLION

Pounds of food and grocery products God's Pantry distributed in fiscal year 2015

10.5
MILLION

Pounds of fresh produce distributed

\$16.77

Worth of groceries distributed for every dollar donated to God's Pantry **equaling...**

10 POUNDS of food or... **8.22 MEALS**

the organization does depends on the more than 17,000 volunteers across the service area. "We can't do this work without volunteers," Halligan said. "The economic impact of our volunteers is part of why we can be so efficient. They translate into about 17 more people we'd have to pay to do the work."

The staff and volunteers of God's Pantry Food Bank, indeed, do their work in a warehouse — on Jaggie Fox Way off Georgetown Road — sorting, organizing, and preparing products for distribution. But their reach goes far beyond the warehouse doors, out into

the areas where the most pressing need exists. As with other food banks, God's Pantry acquires donated food and grocery products and partners with social service agencies throughout the region to get the items to those who are hungry.

"It's very similar to the way commerce works. In our case, donors and the U.S. government provide food to food banks, food banks provide that food to agencies, and the agencies get that food to hungry people where they live," Halligan said.

"You can't solve hunger in a warehouse; you solve hunger in



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a neighborhood where hunger exists,” he added.

Amy Petit, Keeneland’s marketing production manager, volunteered once — and was hooked.

“God’s Pantry’s impact on the community is tremendous — filling a basic need to eat,” said Petit, now a regular volunteer at the Broadway Christian Church food pantry, a partnering food agency.

“We work with the clients, checking them in, stocking shelves with food, and helping them fill their carts,” said Petit.

“Even though my commitment is only a few hours a month, the work is not difficult, and the time I am there I am humbled at the need and grateful for being able to help.”

Keeneland executive chef Marc Therrien, who serves on God’s Pantry’s board, believed he could bring a different perspective to the organization.

“I figured I could help with teaching the folks we help how to use the groceries they received but also nutrition and perhaps a few skills, as well,” said Therrien, who has 27 years in the food and beverage industry. “God’s Pantry is a very forward-thinking operation, and I feel honored to work with the board.”

Amy Gregory, director of communica-



Keeneland employees Amy Petit, left, and Amy Gregory, center, guide Barbara Turley of Lexington through her food distribution day.

tions at Keeneland, who volunteers with Petit and other co-workers, said when she saw how God’s Pantry positively impacted the lives of families, she knew she had to be involved.

“Whenever I volunteer at God’s Pantry, I always leave with a smile on my face,” Gregory said. “There’s a feeling of real community at the food pantry, and respect for everyone who passes through its doors. I feel very

blessed in my life, and this is my small way of paying it forward.”

Keeneland supports God’s Pantry in other ways as part of its mission to serve the community and improve the quality of life in Central Kentucky. For instance, at the Keeneland Kids Club annual Easter Egg Hunt, participants bring canned goods to donate to God’s Pantry. This year Keeneland collected 1,477 pounds of canned goods. **KM**



ADVOCATE FOR HUNGER RELIEF

MICHAEL J. HALLIGAN took over as CEO of God’s Pantry Food Bank in January, moving from Chicago to Lexington to run the “well-respected” organization. The appeal, he said, was that God’s Pantry was the right-sized food bank, positioned to continue growing and doing good work in an area with tremendous need.

Halligan is not new to food banking, however. In addition to years of volunteer work in hunger relief, he was senior vice president of food sourcing and logistics for Feeding America. Halligan also spent several years with PepsiCo, the Quaker Oats Co., and most recently ConAgra Foods.

He and his wife, Lori, who is still in Chicago wrapping up her work as executive director of the Humane Society of Hinsdale, Illinois, have two grown sons.