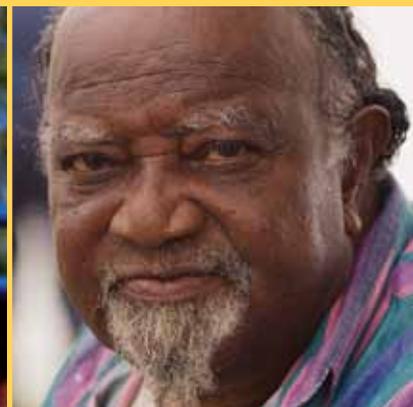


# *Voices of the Hungry*

Understanding the  
needs of today's food shelf users

A comprehensive needs assessment commissioned by Keystone Community Services with funding from the Greater Twin Cities United Way



***"I lost my  
business and  
house after  
30 years."***

***"Need food  
and bus passes  
to help me find  
more work."***



***"I received  
legal custody  
of my nine  
grandchildren."***

April 2012

**Keystone**  
COMMUNITY SERVICES

CONNECTING OUR COMMUNITY

# Why this study was conducted

## Food insecurity — a daily reality

Imagine not knowing how you are going to feed your family today — or tomorrow. This is a daily reality for many in our community. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that 10% of Minnesotans live with food insecurity — the chronic stress of not having enough food for one's family.

For most in this situation, the local food shelf is an essential lifeline. Indeed, in a major shift from their original mission of serving families in short-term emergency situations, food shelves today have become an essential part of the safety net for low-income American households.

## Growing numbers, expanding services

Keystone Community Services began offering food shelf services in the 1980s, serving a handful of St. Paul families per month. Annual growth was modest over the next two decades, but began rising significantly in the 2000s.

In response, Keystone expanded its basic needs program, eventually growing to a network of three food shelves that today serve a large portion of the East Metro area — from downtown St. Paul to Roseville, from Little Canada to the Midway, and the North End neighborhoods of St. Paul. Besides food, Keystone added an outreach worker to provide on-site information and referral and other assistance for clients in the most acute crises.

From the mid-decade on, Keystone's food shelves have experienced one record-breaking year after another. Between 2006 and 2010 alone, Keystone saw an 81% increase in total food shelf visits. 2011 was Keystone's largest ever — an 11% increase over the previous year.

## Where do we go from here?

Faced with increasing requests for assistance, Keystone has grappled with how to keep up with the demand for food — and more importantly, how to help clients move beyond depending on emergency food services. To chart future directions for its strategic plan, Keystone commissioned a needs assessment in mid-2011 in partnership with the Greater Twin Cities United Way.

*The assessment explored these fundamental questions:*

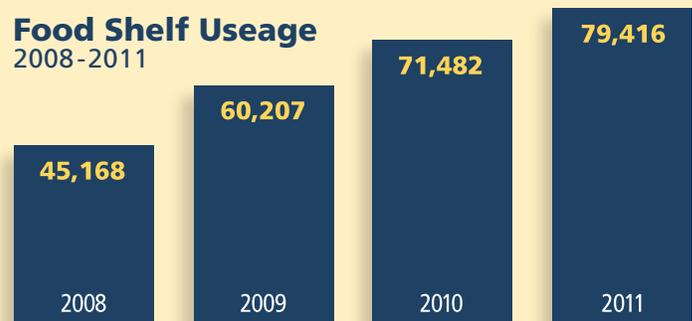
- Who uses the food shelves?
- What other needs do food shelf users have beyond food?
- What can Keystone do to better meet the needs of food shelf users?

The resulting study, entitled *Voices of the Hungry*, yielded valuable insights into the challenges faced by food shelf users and provides an evidence-based approach to enhancing Keystone's basic needs services. Yet it is clear that the path out of poverty cannot be forged by any one human services agency. It requires a concerted community-wide commitment to address the underlying complex systemic issues that has lead many families to the food shelf in the first place.

***"It was very humbling. We had donated to our church for the food shelf in the past, and now we had to receive assistance."***

***"People who used to come here might have been unemployed, not educated, came up through the welfare system...today it is everybody."***

## Food Shelf Usage 2008-2011



## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

# Voices of the Hungry

*During a three-week study period in the fall of 2011, written surveys were completed by 80% of clients who visited Keystone's three food shelves. In addition, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 100 clients, and several focus groups were held. All together, more than 1,500 food shelf clients generously shared their stories and their voices.*

### Who uses the food shelves?

Food shelf users share a common dilemma. All are living on the economic edge, with insufficient income to cover the costs of living. For many, the food shelf is the last line of defense in their struggle to maintain stability in the face of complex and complicated barriers.

Yet *Voices of the Hungry* data reveal that there is no single portrait of Keystone food shelf clients. They are as unique and diverse as the rest of our community. What distinguishes most food shelf users is that they are dealing with complex issues and face serious barriers to self-sufficiency.

- **Family size and composition.** Nearly half (45.7%) have children under age 18 in the home. *Others are single adults or households of two or more relatives, one often caring for others. Still others are grandparents raising grandchildren and seniors who live alone. Some are veterans and many are immigrants from other countries who do not speak English.*
- **Renters.** The vast majority (86.5%) rent. Of the remainder who are owners, many worry about losing their homes. *Paying for heat and utilities is a continuing concern for renters and homeowners alike.*
- **Disabilities.** Nearly half (45.7%) report having a disability. Another 10.4% said they are caring for a disabled family member. The data also indicate that Keystone's food shelf clients have twice the national average of diabetes. In addition, one third have high blood pressure and 10.3% report having a bad heart. Many struggle with mental illness. *Not surprisingly, the data revealed that clients with disabilities are more likely to be long-term food shelf users than those who do not have disabilities. They are more likely to be unemployed and to need additional help with issues such as mental health, legal services or prescriptions.*

***"I used to work... had an accident and needed to go on disability."***

- **Unemployment.** More than two-thirds (68.9%) are unemployed, and nearly half (49.8%) have been unemployed for more than a year. *Of the unemployed, half say they are looking for work. Of those employed, many said with the rising costs of rent and utilities, they do not make enough money to both pay their bills and buy food. Others said they make too much money to qualify for food stamps. A third of the employed said they are worried about losing their job.*
- **Language barrier.** While 81.9% said they speak English, nearly 20% speak a language other than English — 25 languages were cited in all. The majority identified Spanish or Hmong.
- **In crisis.** Half (52.7%) reported having been in crisis "for a long time."



***"I am on nine different medications."***

***“Need help to help reduce my mortgage payments so that I will be able to stay in my home after 20 years.”***

## **What other needs do food shelf users have beyond food?**

In some cases, a food shelf visit is all a family needs to get through a crisis. However, *Voices of the Hungry* data indicate that the vast majority of food shelf clients are struggling with multiple pressing needs.

- **Transportation.** Half (53.3%) said they need help with transportation. *Transportation is a key factor in securing employment – i.e. the ability to get to and from the workplace. Bus tokens and assistance with car repair were named as specific transportation needs. Transportation also presents a problem for some clients getting to and from the food shelf.*
- **Housing and utilities.** More than one in 10 respondents (11.3%) are facing the loss of their housing. One-third of those surveyed needed help with heating and other utility costs. *Maintaining stable housing is a key issue for many food shelf clients. The problem is complex and systemic. A community-wide lack of affordable low-income housing combined with low vacancy rates makes finding housing extremely challenging and often results in homelessness. Housing issues almost always lead to problems maintaining employment and overall family stability.*
- **Employment, training and education.** Half of the unemployed are actively seeking employment. Nearly one-third say they need to learn new job skills (29.6%), and one-fifth (20.0%) want to improve their math, reading or writing skills.
- **Childcare.** Of those interviewed for the study, 46.5% have children. Of those 9.2% indicated a need for help with childcare. Of this subgroup, nearly 40% need help with heating and nearly 50% need help with other utilities.
- **Medical and prescription bills and health insurance.** 17.2% said they do not have health insurance. 23% need help with medical bills and 19.9% with prescription bills.



***“My greatest need is to have a job and pay my bills.”***

- **Nutrition.** One in four (25.7%) want help learning how to eat in a more healthy way, and 17.4% want help finding low-carbohydrate, sugar-free or salt-free foods. In interviews, customers asked for “healthy food”—more milk, eggs, cheese, fresh vegetables and fruit.
- **Mental health services.** One-third (33%) of respondents said they need help with mental health issues. *Responses of those who indicated they had a disability included a range of mental health diagnoses, including bipolar, depression, seasonal affective mood disorder, anxiety, panic attacks, and obsessive compulsive personality disorder.*
- **Financial assistance.** Five percent of clients identified financial assistance as their greatest need. More than a quarter (26.0%) of clients expressed a need for “learning how to manage a very tight budget.”
- **Assistance applying for SNAP (formerly food stamps).** Difficulty in applying for benefits or for an increase in benefits from SNAP was expressed by a number of respondents in interviews and written comments.

***“I used to come because of my children... now I am raising my grandchildren.”***

## KEYSTONE'S RESPONSE:

# An expanded basic needs strategy

Food shelf users are very vulnerable with multiple needs and high levels of stress. In response to *Voices of the Hungry*, Keystone is developing an expanded Basic Needs strategy to reduce the barriers faced by struggling families to get assistance. We are moving forward with implementation, planning and fundraising in the following areas.

- **Intensify case management services within the Basic Needs Program.**

Keystone case managers work with families referred by various sources to support family success and address challenges of stable housing, transportation and parenting. By integrating and expanding this existing Keystone program into the Basic Needs Program, we will increase our level of support for Basic Needs clients.

- **Deepen our strategic partnerships with community providers to better serve food shelf users with multiple needs.**

*Voices of the Hungry* showed that clients consider Keystone's three food shelves to be familiar, trusted and convenient places to receive services. We will forge partnerships with community providers to offer their specialized expertise in core areas such as housing, employment and training, and health screenings, using



***"We need food, warm clothing, mental health drop in center..."***

***"I'm a working person... I just don't have the money to cover everything... so it is pay the rent or buy food...I pay the rent and then come here."***

the food shelf as an access point whenever possible. We will connect clients to crucial services before their situation becomes even more serious — for example, helping them negotiate with a landlord to avoid eviction or helping them with transportation to get to a job.

- **Broaden and enhance the client experience.**

- *Voices of the Hungry* revealed that some 25 languages are spoken by food shelf clients. We will continue to expand bilingual services to assist those for whom English is not the primary language.
- We will develop new tools to provide helpful information to food shelf clients, such as multilingual videos on nutrition and other topics.
- Because transportation is such a critical need, we will explore and integrate ways to provide clients with access to transportation. For example, Keystone will distribute a limited number of bus passes to clients who need transportation home from the food shelf, who are just starting a job and need to help getting to work, or who are job searching.

- **Impact client health through nutritious food options.**

- Keystone will continue to seek additional fresh produce sources such as farmers markets and expand refrigeration storage capacity.
- Keystone has discontinued purchase of high-fructose corn syrup sweetened beverages (such as soda and beverages with less than 10% fruit juice). We will continue to limit purchases of chips, cookies and other low-nutritional snacks. We will continue to place a priority on highly nutritious foods in all of our food purchasing and communicate those priorities to food donors.

- **Continue to increase culturally appropriate pantry basics.**

## VOICES OF THE HUNGRY:

# Speaking to our community

Keystone's Basic Needs Program has received remarkable support of people who live and work in this community. It is only through the generous donations of money, food and volunteer time that Keystone has been able to serve the ever-growing number of people in need of food and other help. Times are difficult for many families. Poverty rates are growing. This means community support of Keystone and agencies like it has never been more critical.

### What can you do?

- Contact Christine Pulver, Director of the Basic Needs Program, to learn what you or your organization can do to support Keystone's Basic Needs Program at [cpulver@keystonecommunityservices.org](mailto:cpulver@keystonecommunityservices.org).
- Host a food collection drive at your church, business or school.
- Volunteer at Keystone food shelves and for other programs serving low-income families.
- Take part in the annual Walk to End Hunger on Thanksgiving morning.
- Donate to Keystone's Family Success Fund, used to assist clients in emergency situations when other community resources are not available.
- Sign up for Keystone's e-newsletter on our web site to learn more about hunger in our community. Follow us on Facebook.

**To learn more, visit [keystonecommunityservices.org](http://keystonecommunityservices.org)**



*Our thanks to those who support Keystone's Basic Needs program.*



***"I have been working for eight days straight and took today to come here and get some food."***

### About Keystone Community Services

Keystone Community Services helps thousands of low-income individuals, families, seniors and youth in the East Metro area to live with dignity and hope for the future. Our mission is to strengthen the capacity of individuals and families to improve their quality of life.

Visit our web site at [keystonecommunityservices.org](http://keystonecommunityservices.org)

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### *Study Credits: Voices of the Hungry:*

A Comprehensive Assessment of Needs was conducted in 2011 by EnSearch (Stacey Stockdill, PhD and Jill Naylor-Yarger, M.Ed and Elizabeth Peterson, PhD, principal investigators) in collaboration with Keystone Community Services and with funding by the Greater Twin Cities United Way. For a copy of the complete report, go to [www.keystonecommunityservices.org/news/food-shelf-client-study-voices-hunger](http://www.keystonecommunityservices.org/news/food-shelf-client-study-voices-hunger).



*Except for this page, all photos in this brochure are stock images, used to represent Keystone food shelf clients.*