

David E. Dix: Federal funds gone, pleas for food rise in Portage

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 expanded the federal child tax credit from \$2,000 per child to \$3,600 per child, food requests to Feeding America declined.

Post COVID, with the expiration of the American Rescue Plan Act, the federal child tax credit is back to pre-pandemic levels of \$2,000 for youngsters ages 17 and younger and appeals for help from Feeding America are going back up.

Linda Nageotte, president of Feeding America, a national network of more than 200 non-governmental food banks that includes Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank, said people without the generous child tax credits are once again trying to decide whether to buy food or pay other bills because they cannot afford to do both.

At the Feb. 20 Akron Roundtable in Quaker Square, I listened to Nageotte speak, thanks to an invitation from Bill Childers, executive director of the United Way of Portage County.

United Way's vision statement reads "A Portage County where no resident is without food, no child is without tools to learn, and no one is without access to care."

I admit to being shamefully out of touch regarding hunger. Intuitively, it seems that in a country as wealthy as the United States, hunger should not be a problem. But it is.

Nageotte used the term "food insecurity," which means people lack access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.

One out of seven people, and one out of five children, suffer from food insecurity, she said.

What's more, Nageotte said, 40% of the food in the United States is wasted, which means it spoils and becomes garbage or expires and is simply thrown out.

Foodbanks attempt to save food while it is still safely edible so it can be distributed to assistance programs like The Center of Hope in Ravenna, Kent Social Services, or to smaller food assistance programs stationed in communities throughout Portage County, all of which Portage County United Way supports.

Feeding America helps the food insecure who earn too much to qualify for federal programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides food for a three-person family whose household income is less than \$2,798 per month or \$33,576 per year. SNAP families, if no one is earning, cannot continue the food benefit after three months. Nageotte praised programs like SNAP, pointing out that for every SNAP dollar, about \$1.50 of economic activity is generated.

Thanks to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, children in households that earn less than \$33,576 per year are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches and breakfasts supplied through the public schools. For many, those might be the only decent meals school-age children have to eat.

That is where programs like the Ben Curtis Family Foundation make a big difference. Prior to the start of the Akron Roundtable, Childers and I ran into Candace Curtis, president of Birdie Bags, which she runs with her husband, Ben Curtis, a retired pro golfer.

Birdie Bags contain six meals and four snacks that school-age youngsters can take home on weekends and during the summer.



The food mostly comes from donations. Childers says about 40% to 50% of Portage County public school students qualify for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's free or reduced lunch program and receive food help in addition from the Ben Curtis Family Foundation's program.

Curtis said the Birdie Bag program covers a majority of the school districts in Portage County plus some in Summit County, including Barberton.

At the Portage County United Way table, I joined Childers; Karlo Petrak, financial director of Portage United Way; Brittany O'Neil, who oversees United Way's 211 assistance program for Summit, Medina, Portage and other counties; Sarah Wise, of Stark and Portage counties Catholic Charities; Melissa Koher of Hometown Bank, this year's Portage United Way campaign chair; and Amy Cooper and Sarah Meduri from Portage County Health District, whose quarters host the Portage County United Way office.

Portage Bar honors

By attending the Akron Roundtable, I missed the Portage County Bar Association's awards luncheon, where attorney Eric Finke received the Norman Sandvoss Humanitarian Award and Juvenile Court Bailiff Paul Fisher the Public Service Award. Recognized for 50 years in the practice of law were Judge Thomas Carnes, Magistrate Richard Badger and Attorney John Flynn.

David E. Dix is a former publisher of The Record-Courier.

