

# Mazon Sheds Light on America's Hidden Hunger

## THIS IS HUNGER

A community engagement program of MAZON | A Jewish Response to Hunger

42.2 million Americans are struggling with hunger—and that figure includes members of our community.

By Suzanne Pollak

ROCKVILLE (Md.) — After viewing a 60-minute presentation on hunger in America, Jill Myers of Rockville was visibly moved.

"The food thing is something that eats away at me. There are so many people in the Jewish community who have big Shabbat dinners and lavish bar mitzvahs and weddings. There is always excess that I know goes to waste. It just frustrates me," said Myers, a member of the Bender Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington board of directors.

The presentation Myers viewed was entitled "This is Hunger." The traveling interactive exhibit, housed in a 53-foot-long double expandable traveling truck trailer, was created by Mazon, a Jewish organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the US and Israel. The exhibit stopped at the JCC from February 16 to 21 and was at Washington Hebrew Congregation from February 8 to 13.

Up to 30 visitors at a time enter the trailer and sit down at a long dinner table. A light shines down to create an imaginary plate at each seat. For the first 14 minutes, attendees watch a video that features real Americans telling their devastating stories.

Many of those featured currently work but can't make ends meet. Others lost their jobs and haven't been able to find new ones. Still others fluctuate between paying for their medications or groceries, but never have enough money for both. Some spoke about how they can only afford less-healthy, more-filling options and worry how that will affect their children's future.

are children and 5.7 million are senior adults.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity "as a lack of access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life."

The goal of the traveling display, which opened in November in Los Angeles and has no end date, "is to open people's eyes to the reality of hunger and make them act," said Maya Joshua, tour facilitator.

Viewers are handed a paper placemat displaying the five food groups – protein, vegetables, fruit grains and dairy. They then choose from the foods on the placemat to create a dinner for a family of four. One participant, who strove to keep costs to a minimum, came up with a healthy dinner at a total cost of \$7.32 for the family.



Her pride in creating the meal diminished quickly when informed that the national Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the food stamps program, provides on average of \$1.40 per person per meal. A family of four, therefore, only had \$5.60,



zation. The percentage of people participating in SNAP between 2013 and 2015 was 20 percent in D.C., 7.3 percent in Maryland and 6 percent in Virginia.

During those two years, 13.2 percent of District of Columbia residents were food insecure. In Maryland, the figure was 10.7 percent. In Virginia, it was 9.8 percent, according to Mazon. In Fairfax County, there were 5.7 percent considered food insecure. In D.C., the number was 13.8 percent.

Families struggling to put food on their tables exist even in affluent Montgomery County.

Over the years, there has been an increase in the number of people requesting assistance and food, Sushner said. He believes that it is partly due to more people learning about his organization and the help it offers.

Also, he said, "I think the need in general has grown over the past years."

One thing recipients have in common, said Sushner, is that they are ashamed they cannot provide for themselves and their families. Some people are very worried that their neighbors will find out they need help.

"About half of our recipients ask for extreme confidentiality," he said. Only one volunteer at Yad Yehuda is familiar with all the clients; most only know of the few they assist.

Capital Kasher Pantry partners with the Capital Area Food Bank in Washington, D.C. Volunteers go to the food bank and for very little cost bring back fresh and canned foods and pasta to distribute.

Some families only receive packages of groceries. Others participate in the Tomchei Shabbos program and are given gift certificates to Shalom Kasher Market. There is plenty of overlap and many families receive both, he said.

The amount distributed is based on need and the number of people in the family. Generally, if a person qualifies for government assistance, he or she is eligible for what Yad Yehuda offers.

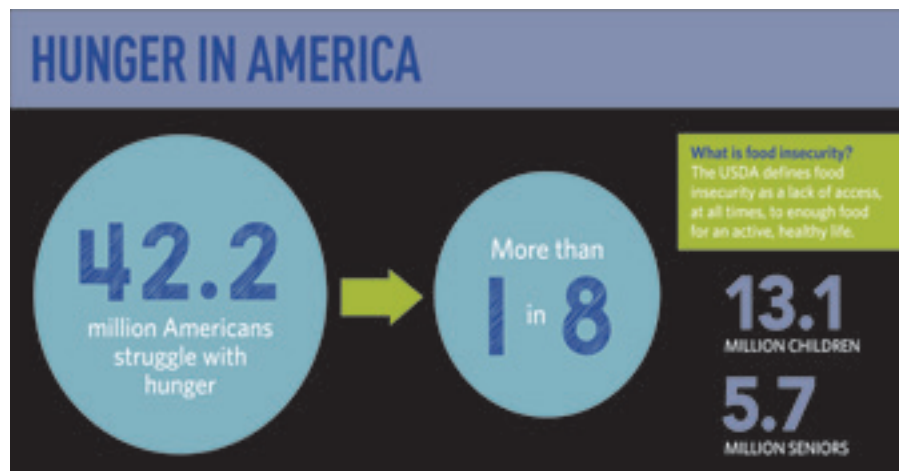
Mazon's Joshua wants everyone to "consider yourself a long-term hunger advocate."

Advocates raise awareness in their communities, use their social media accounts to spread the word, join a campaign designed to end hunger and stay engaged by signing up for Mazon's advocacy alerts, she explained.

After exiting Mazon's trailer, Myers said she hoped to get involved in "food rescue," which involves collecting edible food that would otherwise go to waste from places such as restaurants and grocery stores and distributing it to local emergency food programs. However, she said, the problem "is bigger than just the food."

Pointing to job creation and other problems, Myers said: "The entire picture has to change."

To donate food and/or money to The Capital Kasher Pantry or to apply for assistance, go to <http://www.yadyehuda.org>.



Once the presentation ended, viewers wandered around the 1,000-square-foot exhibit, reading the graphics and stories that were posted all over the walls.

There are 42.2 million Americans struggling with hunger, according to Mazon. That translates to one in eight Americans. Of that total, 13.1 million

which is \$1.72 less than the participant's already-frugal meal.

Knowing who is food insecure "is not obvious when we look around," but they are in our neighborhoods, Joshua said.

Roughly 14 percent of Americans participate in SNAP, and nearly 69 percent of them have children, according to Ma-