



NEWS RELEASE

KNOX COUNTY MAYOR MIKE RAGSDALE

400 MAIN STREET, SUITE 615, KNOXVILLE TN 37902

September 26, 2008

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Lee Murphy, MS-MPH, RD, LDN
Knox County Health Department
865.215.5184

Hunger Hike Helps Get Food to Those in Need

Sponsored by Emergency Food Helpers

Sunday, Oct. 5 at 3 p.m.

Lakeshore Park -- TVA Pavilion, Knoxville

The Hunger Hike is an annual event to benefit churches and pantries which provide food to hungry people in Knox County. Emergency Food Helpers (EFH) is a network of pantries working together to coordinate food assistance programs. Second Harvest Food Bank, a member of EFH, is a major food supplier for pantries, but does not distribute food directly to individuals. Pantries are always in need of financial resources to keep their shelves stocked. It is for this reason that the Hunger Hike is held. All of the funds raised at the Hunger Hike are distributed to participating pantries, according to the designation of each hiker.

The 2.5-mile Hunger Hike will be held on Sunday, October 5, 2008, starting at the TVA Pavilion at Lakeshore Park in Knoxville. Registration begins at 2 p.m. and the Hike will commence at 3 p.m. Registration is a \$15 donation and hikers are encouraged to get additional sponsors. Entrants will receive a canvas Hunger Hike tote bag while supplies last.

Food Needs in Our Community

More than 41 percent of Knox County school children were eligible for free or reduced meals for the 2007-08 school year, a 10.2 percent increase of economically disadvantaged children since 2003. The percent of children eligible for free or reduced meals increased almost every year since 2003, indicating an increase in the number of families struggling financially.

Second Harvest reported 15.33 percent of Tennessee residents as food insecure between 2006 and 2007. That's an increase from 14.92 percent between 2005 and 2006. While that may seem like a small percentage of the total population, it represents more than 224,000 hungry Tennesseans. More than 167,000 people live in poverty in East Tennessee, and one in five youth and one in seven seniors are at risk of going hungry. From June 2006 to July 2008, Second Harvest distributed 11.2 million pounds of food to its 18 county region. More than 8,000,000 meals were provided to hungry people, but Second Harvest estimates this meets just one-fourth of the total need to eliminate hunger in East Tennessee.

The 61,000 residents, or 14.41 percent of Knox County's population, who live below the poverty level have sought emergency food assistance either on a short-term or long-term basis. In 2007-2008, Second Harvest delivered more than 700,000 meals a month through 450 food

provider agencies to more than 120,000 children, adults and seniors in the 18 counties of East Tennessee, including Knox County. Many are first-time, middle-income families who previously donated to food banks and are scared and embarrassed to be requesting food.

In 2007, there was an eight percent increase in the number of pantries applying for the Federal Emergency Food and Shelter program food portion. In 2008, the number of pantries applying rose by another 8 percent. The need in the community is also evident given the increase in total calls to pantries in Knox County, a 17 percent increase from last year. In addition, the pantries are reporting difficulty in keeping their shelves stocked. The distribution of emergency food is a significant factor in decreasing and preventing the risk of homelessness, since many people have to choose between buying food and paying other expenses. A strong emergency food system supports low-income working families in getting the food they need and using their limited funds for rent, utilities or other critical family expenses.

The cost of food is a significant issue for low-income families. In a 2008 survey of community gardeners, 57 percent of the respondents said they gardened because it saved them money on food; 63 percent of the gardeners selected "cheaper food" as the most important factor in buying food, much more important than where the store was located (14percent) or how they would get to it (12 percent).

Food stamp usage has increased substantially in the State and in Knox County over the past five years, reversing a trend started by welfare reform and contradicting the census data that showed a decline in poverty from 1990 to 2000. Statewide figures indicate a 29 percent increase in Food Stamp participation from Fiscal Years 2002 to 2007, from 284,291 to 400,715. The increase in Knox County has been almost the same (28.3 percent) as the statewide increase. It seems reasonable to assume that economic downturns drive more families to seek food assistance from the government, as well as increasing their dependence on private charities.

Hardships created by economic recession and low wages for many jobs in Knoxville combine to create the risk of hunger for many individuals and their families. This is the challenge faced by Emergency Food Helpers and the Hunger Hike.

###