

# OPINION

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## Visit to pantry would open pols' eyes

As state cuts services,  
economic stress builds  
on Michigan's families

Four years ago, I had a wake-up call. It was the cry of a hungry child — my own. I rose in the night, groggy with sleep, but certain of one thing: I had food for her.

But I began to wonder what those midnight hours would be like if I did not.

More than 570,000 children in Michigan live in poverty, according to a story in the Feb. 24 Lansing State Journal. Michigan leads the nation in the number of "working poor" families.

Over the last 18 years, the national average of working poor rose by 48 percent. Michigan's numbers, however, increased by an astounding 152 percent. The loss of solid-paying manufacturing jobs and the growth of low-paying retail jobs are only part of the reason more Michigan families are pressed below the poverty line.

Nine years ago, Mary Nelson took over the Haslett Community Church's food bank — then a two-cupboard emergency supply serving one family a



**H. Katharine Swearingen**

*Voices*

month. Now the church helps 35 families every month.

"I have seen needs skyrocket in the last four years," Nelson said. "Ninety percent of the people who come to our church's food bank for assistance have jobs. But they can't make ends meet."

And the needs are increasing. Many are single mothers struggling on low-paying jobs with no benefits. Already existing on the margins, many lose hours of work when a child gets sick or a car breaks down. The lack of safe, affordable housing, quality child care, and public transportation add more stress to lives already lived on the edge.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus announces he has come "to preach good news to the poor. To set at liberty those who are

oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

I don't believe the acceptable year occurs when parents work, but the wages they earn still cannot provide food, medical care and safe housing for their children.

I don't believe the acceptable year includes one in which welfare rolls get pared down to their lowest number in 29 years, while food banks see a doubling of families lining up outside their doors.

I don't believe the acceptable year happens when thousands of community volunteers race year after year, trying to fill the widening gaps created by diminishing public entitlements.

If our elected officials were to spend one day at Lansing's Red Cross Food Distribution Center — a major support for Lansing area food banks — they might become inspired. Inspired by the determination, pluck, and compassion of countless church members, young people, and business leaders — all of whom scramble to gather hundreds of thousands of goods to help with the rising needs of Michigan's working poor.

Inspired by these volunteers, our government leaders could generate a

wake-up call for the entire nation. Instead of coming in last, Michigan could lead our country by eliminating conditions that allow poverty to flourish.

Strategies to help the working poor were put forth by the Michigan League for Human Services' Budget and Tax Policy:

- Promote job training opportunities and education.
- Create safe and affordable housing.
- Adjust the minimum wage as inflation increases.
- Provide solid child care.
- Improve access to health care.
- Create for workers a fair tax system.

When we honor the most vulnerable, when we speak for those who have no voice, when every child goes to bed well fed, then we can begin to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

*H. Katharine Swearingen of Haslett is free-lance writer with a Master of Divinity degree. She belongs to the State Journal's Editorial Advisory Board whose members write a column each Thursday. Write her c/o Lansing State Journal, 120 E. Lenawee, Lansing 48919.*