

## ...A Hunger to Achieve But Still Too Many Empty Plates

By GUY ARSENEAU

They arrive early in the morning and line up patiently, waiting for a small breakfast often consisting of two sausages, a roll and coffee. Some request takeout food that will serve as lunch during the course of their workdays. These are the men, women and children who rely on St. John's Bread and Life for their daily nutritional needs.

St. John's Bread and Life has a 25-year history of feeding the hungry, the homeless and the working poor. Known as the largest provider of emergency food in the borough, this Catholic social program, which is open to all, serves over 200,000 hot meals annually—a figure that will be exceeded by the end of this year.

The organization's Mobile Soup Kitchen (MSK) van provides 90,000 hot meals annually. Using a converted Winnebago, staff members and volunteers travel to East New York, Brownsville, Coney Island, Williamsburg and Jackson Heights, Queens, five days a week. In addition

to being a kitchen on wheels, the van functions as a mobile social-services office, providing men and women with access to medical and legal referrals, AIDS counseling, substance abuse programs and assistance with housing and employment.

The hunger experienced by clients at St. John's reflects a citywide crisis. According to the Food Bank for New York City, approximately 1.3 million people in New York rely on emergency food programs, a 24% increase since 2004. This group includes 397,000 children, 730,000 adults (ages 18 to 64), and 154,000 seniors.

Hunger, aptly described as the shadow of poverty, has an ongoing and corrosive effect on the health of those who experience it daily.

Figures from the Food Bank of New York City indicate that 34% of the elderly who are chronically hungry also suffer from diabetes. Staff members and volunteers at St. John's Bread and Life also meet people who are suffering from obesity, yet are slowly starving to death. These are individuals who must rely on junk food for their daily nutritional needs. The ironies and indignities surrounding hunger are magnified in New York. People seeking help from the city in getting food stamps are photographed and fingerprinted during the course of what is

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often a day-long, dehumanizing application procedure. Tragically, in New York City a one-room apartment is a “steal” at \$1,800 a month, yet the urban poor are locked into jobs that pay less than \$8 an hour. In 1969, humankind was able to put a man on the moon, now if we could just figure out a way to put food on the table.

*For more information on St. John's Bread and Life, please visit their website at*

*[www.breadandlife.org](http://www.breadandlife.org)*