

Letter-writing campaign part of annual national effort calling attention to hunger, poverty issues

By **Ryan Trares** - 6/2/17 11:40 PM

About 200 letters were stacked on a table in U.S. Rep. Trey Hollingsworth's Greenwood office.

Each had been written by church members on the southside of Indianapolis, as well as Bloomington. In their own words, they had implored Hollingsworth to work in Congress to alleviate the crippling hunger problem impacting Indiana and the country.

"This is a collective Christian voice calling for the end of hunger. As Christians, we're called to protect the weak, the hungry, the poor," said Jana Forster, a member of Resurrection Lutheran Church on the southside.

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L-R U.S. Rep. Trey Hollingsworth talks to Mike Hastings, Karen Hildebrandt, Dave Schreiber and Tom Blake on Wednesday at his Greenwood office. The group is part of contingent of churches located on the southside of Indianapolis and throughout southern Indiana that have written letters imploring members of Congress to do something about the hunger issues in the U.S. Scott Roberson / Daily Journal

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The campaign is a local piece of a larger national effort to call attention to hunger issues. Every year, Christian advocacy group Bread for the World organizes an Offering of Letters. Local churches and faith communities band together to write letters to their Congressional leaders, requesting further action on specific legislation impacting hunger issues.

A contingent of Indiana churches have penned 2,100 letters to give to legislators. The hope is that they can drive home just how vital hunger relief programs are.

"There are constituents that are concerned about the direction that the country is going in this particular area, given the budget that has significant cuts to food stamps and other hunger relief issues," said Tom Blake, one of the local volunteer leaders for the letter campaign and a member at Resurrection Lutheran Church.

On Wednesday, Resurrection Lutheran Church and Friedens United Church of Christ, also located on the southside, joined with St. Paul's Catholic Center in Bloomington to take letters to Hollingsworth's office.

Volunteers had met with Hollingsworth previously to discuss hunger and educate him on Bread for the World. He was impressed by the message the group brought to him.

"Meeting passionate Hoosiers who care deeply about our communities and children's futures is inspiring; I want to carry that inspiration to Washington to ensure the challenges we discussed are addressed," Hollingsworth said.

Getting legislators to think about the impact they have in fighting hunger is the main goal of

Bread for the World. Staff members in Washington D.C. watch all legislation developing at the federal level for actions that might affect the war on hunger.

"Their sole purpose in life is advocating at the federal level for improvements in domestic and international hunger relief," Blake said. "We're making sure that the legislators know the impact of some of the financial and legal decisions they are making."

Blake is a volunteer for a local chapter of Bread for the World, as well as a member at Resurrection Lutheran Church on the southside. One of the group's most effective measures is the Offering of Letters.

Each year's letter-writing campaign has a focus. This year's is to pressure Congress to make funding decisions that will put the country and the world on track to end world hunger by 2030

Important safety-net programs, such as global nutrition, Women, Infants and Children and refundable tax credits, should be protected.

Unfortunately, the current legislative and political climate in the country has made this year's offering all the more necessary, Blake said.

President Donald Trump's priorities for the 2018 fiscal year budget contains cuts to programs that are critical to helping poor and hungry people include SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The Rev. David Beckman, president of Bread for the World, called the budget "an assault on the poor and hungry," in a statement.

According to Bread for the World research, 95 percent of all of the money used for hunger relief in the U.S. comes from the federal government. Just 5 percent comes from private organizations such as churches and food pantries.

"It's wonderful that people have food pantries and do community meals. It's great. But that's only 1/20th of the help. Most of it comes from the federal government. Particularly at this time, we have a huge concern that those programs could be drastically cut, and people could die," Forster said.

Throughout May, church members were asked to submit a letter asking for funding on hunger-relief programs. "Pastors roll in the theme of Christian behavior and work for the hungry and

poor as part of our calling. The biblical basis of advocating toward the government for specific Christian causes is a big deal," Blake said.

Those letters were offered during worship services on May 14, and then volunteers divided them to deliver to representatives and senators. Bundles will be dropped off at the offices of Sen. Todd Young and Sen. Joe Donnelly in Indianapolis, as well as other members of Congress from Indiana.

To those who have participated in the letter campaign, the work to end hunger aligns with the core of their Christian belief. But at the same time, it is foundational to the freedom that the U.S. stands for.

"Advocacy is a really important privilege of citizenship," Forster said.

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