

Poverty takes a toll in Kansas communities. Those working to help need more resources, not less.



Opinion by Rebecca Phillips, Nov. 19, 2024 [Kansas Reflector](#)

I recently did some reading on food insecurity. The article said that in 2020, 13.8 million households were food insecure at some time during the year. It got me thinking about food assistance and my friend Haley Kottler of the Kansas Appleseed. I met with Haley for a breakfast burrito and coffee in downtown Topeka about a year ago, when she was going to the Kansas Statehouse for hearings about food insecurity.

I was awestruck by Haley's compassion and her fiery zeal to help eliminate hunger in Kansas. Kansas Appleseed does so much good in advocating for those who are vulnerable and who experience poverty. There is lots of that to go around these days.

I grew up in a middle class home where my dad was a professor and my mom had a home medical transcription business so she could stay at home with her two daughters — my sister and me. I remember how my mom prepared wonderful meals for us and we often went out to eat. On Sundays after church, my dad drove us to the Holiday Inn to eat at the Sunday buffet. I never recall a struggle with food.

It wasn't until I was diagnosed with a mental illness that I was exposed to a lot of folks in need, especially those who needed food, health care, transportation, clothes, hygiene items and a safe place to live. A lot of people aren't familiar with Valeo Health Care in Topeka, but it helps support thousands with serious mental illness.

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Providers like Valeo and Breakthrough House truly reach out, and for many people the staff at these two non-profits become like family. Sondra Knox is the housing person at Valeo and she talks of how incredibly difficult it is to find housing and places to rent in today's economy. She also said the waiting list at the Topeka Housing Authority is lengthy, more than 1,000. People are crying out for housing. The need is like a gaping wound that needs healing.

Another need is health care. So many who are mentally ill and homeless have little to no health care. I went to a social worker at the former New Beginnings Health Care in Topeka for almost 15 years. I drove there in my warm car and sat in the comfortable waiting room until my counselor came to get me. He listened and made me feel affirmed. For people with a mental illness who are on the streets, affirmation is a distant luxury. They would love to have a car with heat, a waiting room with nice people, and a kind and caring person to open up to.

Barry Feaker is doing so much to help those in need of support in Topeka. He and the others at the Topeka Rescue Mission daily reach out to help meet needs. Feaker has not given up after all these years in trying to come up with compassionate solutions to the crises we see all around us.

So the needs are great and they aren't going anywhere. Budget cuts to necessary programs like food assistance aren't the answer. We need more funding, more attention and more support for the least among us.

It is my hope and my deep prayer that when the Kansas legislators reconvene in January that compassion will become a battle cry and wise strategies and discussion will come about to help Kansans in need. After all, we are all human and we all have different needs. The time is now to reach out and help.

Rebecca Lyn Phillips is a published author, speaker and mental health advocate.

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