

Organization Background

Responding to God's love, WAFER provides food and works to eliminate hunger.

WAFER has a 30 year history in the greater La Crosse area, continually evolving and growing to keep up with the food needs of local communities. Originally known as The Emergency Food Basket, the food pantry was located near the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. The Emergency Food Basket was created and serviced by the Lutheran Campus Ministry and Roncalli Newman Center. Food, resources, and volunteers were provided by local churches. In 1985, a task force formed the Board of Directors and just one year later W.A.F.E.R. (West Avenue Food Emergency Resource) hired an Executive Director and moved to the basement of St. Paul's Lutheran Church on West Avenue. During the first year of operation, client households were allowed one emergency food package and just over 3300 food packages were provided. In 1986, non-profit status was granted by the state.

In 2002, a different location was sought in order to improve safety and accessibility to client families, those with physical limitations, and volunteers in addition to improving the conditions to safely store food. After moving to the current location, the WAFER acronym remained, but the lengthy name was dropped. During this year, WAFER became a TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program) outlet, participating in the government commodities program. With the addition of TEFAP, visits were increased to a minimum of one time per month and nearly 9500 food packages were distributed to families and individuals.

Today, WAFER is La Crosse County's largest food pantry, serving approximately 1600 families each month. In total, roughly 20,000 food packages feed 50,000 people each year for approximately four days each month. In addition to food packages distributed from the food pantry, WAFER staff and board regularly assess needs and address the needs with expanded or altered programming to ensure that basic needs are being met, as much as possible. In 1985, WAFER provided emergency food to each family one time per year. Fast forward to 2014, WAFER is nearing the 30th year service and actively operates seven additional programs.

Each individual or family served by WAFER is at a different place in life: homeless, looking for work, having a job that doesn't adequately provide support, chronically ill, newly diagnosed, living in a rural area, lack of transportation, physical disability, mental disability, or elderly. Despite honorable intentions to eliminate hunger completely in our community, state, or nation, there will always be chronically impoverished people. While that statement is somewhat pessimistic, it is realistic to assume that there will always be people who will rely on "charity" just to survive, based on the cards life has dealt (severe mental or physical disability, physical deformities, life-altering accidents, etc). As a result of the varying needs presented in our local communities, WAFER has established, implemented, and collaborated with multiple partners to address those needs.

Communities which utilize WAFER services include: La Crosse, Holmen, Onalaska, West Salem, Mindoro, Bangor, and Rockland. Services are extended to residents in Houston County, MN, as well because of limited resources in that area.