



Perspective The Gathering

by David Nelson, PhD, MS – Department of Family and Community Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin

The place will not be open for another four hours and yet the people gather. There are three sets of numbers labeled “1–100” in colors of green, yellow, and blue. On a “normal” Saturday, several hundred would be served three to five days of food for every member of their family. Everyone desires the green numbers as they signify those that will be served first. Pre-COVID-19, all three sets of numbers would be used. Now, the community is hesitant and even scared of leaving the house. Nobody can afford to be sick these days.

As a result, the numbers at the pantry are down. At least two sets of numbers and maybe three depending on the time of the month. Checks come out at the end and beginning of the month and though there is always need, there is less need at those times. Those that do not understand the need may criticize those who rely on this place and call people that come here “entitled” or “lazy” as if poverty is only a myth or a matter of will power. Better not to debate but instead continue to serve. There is always uncertainty in these neighborhoods.

When people arrive at this early hour of 6am at this time of year, it is light outside and the birds are up and singing their songs. The neighborhood is quiet this time of day. The night shift people doing what they do went to bed recently and those that needed to get to work are already gone. There is a stillness and, at another time of year during the later fall and winter, it would be dark. See, poverty, like COVID-19 does not care the time of year it is and whether it is light or dark. Both do what they do, and, in this neighborhood, there is little push back from those that live here. The residents and those that arrive are doing the best they can with what they have available.

Dennis is always present on the day this place is opening. A big man, with dark eyes, he keeps watch over the numbers and the front entrance. He too comes for food for his family, but he also gives much to the organization as a volunteer. He greets people with a smile and maybe an elbow bump in this time of COVID-19. Those that gather here like appropriate hugs and touches but in this time of the virus, it has decreased. The hugs are missed, and it is not known when they will return. Someone says, "I'll give you twice the hugs when this is over," and they mean it. The people gather and Dennis gives out numbers in ones and twos – with a nod and a smile and to many "you are welcome" to those that thank him. Small acts of kindness go a long way in a world filled with scarcity.

They continue to arrive a couple of hours before the place opens. They come in cars and trucks that have seen better days. Dents and scratches and sometimes loud exhausts spew blue smoke out the back end. Almost all with brown rust behind a wheel well or in front of the rear bumper that is bent from either being hit or bumping into something. Salt and water and metal creates a cancer on cars and trucks, slowly consuming the vehicle year by year – yet the vehicle brings people. Some single families and some double and tripling up. Having a vehicle is a luxury when you must haul six bags of groceries for your family. If there is no auto, people walk or even ride a bike. Just getting by...

They gather from all over the city. This place is not required to serve one zip code and so they come – many with black and brown skin. Many languages spoken here – at last count eleven, including sign language. See, hunger does not care what language you speak and the only solution to hunger is food and nourishment. Language never stopped this place from providing what they can with what they have. Somehow, it all works out and the people are fed and there is enough and seemingly abundance if there is sharing. The families are small, and the families are large. Some families are directly related while others related through kinship or culture. The sharing not only pertains to food but to place. Some have multiple families living under one roof. People doing what they do to get by and to survive.

One gathering place in one city, not as an anomaly, but as an everyday occurrence. See, poverty is all around this city and in cities across this country. Where there is a stark mark for those that have and those that have not. Better not be on the latter side – but the line between the two groups is shrinking. More people out of work and more people in need. Those that live in this way know how it goes but what about the newcomers to poverty? Will they know how it goes and where to go and how to make the connections to survive? Time will only tell, and it is in the uncertainty of this virus that we must come together, to share resources and to hope.

This is our community and we gather.

David Nelson, PhD MS is an Associate Professor of Family and Community Medicine at MCW. He leads many of MCW's community engagement efforts, partnering with public and private organizations to enhance learning, research, patient care and the health of the community. Much of this work involves leaving campus and going to the places where the people he wants to help live, work and play. He serves on the board of Friedens Community Ministries, a local network of food pantries working to end hunger in the community.

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