

## Holidays and Food Insecurity

The holiday season means a higher demand for food in Stillwater.

By: Charlie Thomas, Dec. 10, 2023

Stillwater, Okla. — As Stillwater residents prepare for the holiday season, many families face food insecurity due to kids being out of school for the winter.

Our Daily Bread is a food and resource center for families in the Oklahoma area. Locations include Stillwater, Enid, and mobile markets that hit various cities around the state. Garrett Smith, internal program manager at the Stillwater Our Daily Bread location, knows the importance of food resources during the holiday season. “Right before any major holiday, so right before Thanksgiving and right before Christmas, we always expect a big spike,” Smith said. “But also, whenever breaks are happening for kids that are in elementary school, college, high school, we see a lot of families come through because now the kids that received free lunches, aren’t getting those anymore when they come home.”

According to Feeding America, one in seven people face hunger in Oklahoma and 45.2% of children need SNAP assistance. According to Oklahoma.gov, “SNAP enables low-income families to buy nutritious food with Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards. SNAP recipients spend their benefits to buy eligible food in authorized retail food stores/Farmers’ Markets.”

The main problem faced by food shelters, like Our Daily Bread Stillwater, is that it is in a college town. This can be good and bad for the organization. “We have so many groups through OSU (Oklahoma State University), which is so nice, but so many volunteers come from OSU, so there is a dip when they head home for the holidays.”

Michael Clark, a student at Oklahoma State University and volunteer at Our Daily Bread said “Every time I showed up, there would be a line leading out the door with people. I had a year during COVID where my parents were unemployed, and we had to go to a food bank and they provided about 75% of the food we cooked on Thanksgiving, so I’d say it’s essential.”

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, a food desert is defined as “areas in the United States where people have limited access to a variety of healthy and affordable food.” According to the University of Oklahoma Health Science Center, the census tracks that 41% of Oklahoma is a food desert. Only 56% of Oklahoma citizens have access to healthy and affordable food, usually a grocery store or farmer’s market.

“One of our most important satellite locations is in Ripley, Oklahoma,” Smith said. “They don’t have a grocery store there, so the only access to food is through the gas station. We have had our Ripley marketplace site open for about a year and a half now, and it’s been awesome. It is open once a week, so people can get groceries.”

Blake Smith understands the importance of food banks and why they need to exist, especially during the winter months. Smith has been interested in volunteering and wants to get involved. “I have never been around food banks, but I know OSU is doing a lot to help with volunteering,” Blake Smith said. “During the winter months, I can only imagine families struggle with getting food to make the holiday season memorable.”

Combatting the stereotype that comes with needing help is a big goal for food pantries like Our Daily Bread Stillwater. “There is a big stigma in general of just asking for help, especially at food

pantries,” Garrett Smith said. “We see a lot of people that are pretty apprehensive the first time they come in and what we want to do is instill dignity, let people know, ‘Hey, it’s not your fault you are here.’ So we try to make the shopping experience as normal as possible.”

Going into the holiday season, Our Daily Bread Stillwater, along with other food banks around Oklahoma, will work towards making sure every family can have food on the table for Christmas and the New Year. They implore you to look for volunteering opportunities in your communities this holiday season and to go to food shelters if you need them. For more information on how you can volunteer and get food assistance, go to <https://www.ourdailybreadstillwater.org/>.