

SALUTE TO Unsung Heroes

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Food Banks

In a challenging period of economic instability, tens of millions of Americans may be struggling with hunger on any given day.

Food banks fill a critical role, working across the nation to ensure that people in poverty can enjoy healthy meals. You can support the work they do in your community by making monetary contributions and joining other volunteers at the pantry.

If you see food bank personnel at work in neighborhoods around town, reach out and thank them for taking the time to help those who are less fortunate. Here's how you can help, with additional information on what it takes to keep the doors open at a local food pantry.

FOOD DISTRIBUTION

Food banks come in different sizes depending on the community they are supporting, ranging from smaller facilities in rural areas to sizable warehouses in larger cities. Each depends on a network of giving citizens and relationships with grocers. The organizations store large inventories of food and distribute everything through soup kitchens, faith-based organizations and other local outlets.

While you can make a



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difference by donating food directly, financial assistance might make a bigger impact with local food banks. Most food-assistance organizations can buy food at cheaper prices than are typically offered at grocery stores.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Donations to national

organizations like Feeding America are distributed across a larger network of pantries in need. You can make a difference at the pantry in your area by becoming more directly involved. Visit a facility and ask for a list of their needs. Some may be hoping for a simple contribution or they may need tasks

accomplished by a volunteer.

Some food assistance programs in local communities will accept individual food donations. Most grocery stores around the nation feature giving barrels for canned foods and other non-perishable items. You may personally know someone who is in need.

In either case, return to your cupboards and look for goods that never made it into a recipe or were simply forgotten.

Make sure the expiration dates haven't passed and that the packaging is intact. If so, you can donate those unused non-perishable foods to a family in need.

School Bus Drivers

Generation after generation, a miracle happens during every school day as kids are delivered to their classrooms on time and then returned home at the end of the day. Yet the person behind the wheel is too often overlooked.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Driving can be difficult enough when you don't have dozens of rambunctious kids sitting behind you in the vehicle. Then there is the increased sense of responsibility associated with transporting another family's children. Other variables over the course of any given school day include inclement weather and other distracted or rule-breaking motorists.

School bus drivers are typically responsible for general checks of the vehicle, including lights, tires and brakes. They must keep a careful record of fuel usage and miles driven, too. That's all after earning a special commercial driver's license certification, which itself is no easy task.

HOW TO HELP

Parents can help address school bus etiquette, one of the other unique issues facing these unsung heroes. Children should be taught the



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importance of respecting the driver and following the rules. Riding the bus is actually safer than arriving at school by passenger vehicle, as long as everyone does their part. Good bus-riding behavior makes this trip even safer, so students should remain seated while wearing safety belts, if available. Loud noises can distract the driver, increasing the

possibility of an accident. Kids should keep their arms and heads inside the bus at all times.

As for oncoming drivers, remember that buses make frequent stops. Look out for entering and exiting students. Other vehicles are usually required to stop when the bus lights are flashing, depending on roadway configurations.

Travel then resumes as normal once the driver turns off the lights.

DRIVER SHORTAGES

A nationwide shortage of drivers has developed, as they deal with issues ranging from unruly children, pay concerns, a difficult work schedule and a general lack of recognition. This has meant students are

now more often arriving late and their grades are being directly affected. In many cases, routes have been combined — which leads to kids getting home hours later than before. In a few isolated cases, districts have even resorted to a return to remote learning. It's just another example of how important school bus drivers are to students and schooling.



Small Business Owners

Since 2000, experts say small business owners have accounted for more than 65% of new jobs.

Along the way, they've become a local force multiplier for economic growth: When you shop local, a larger portion of the money spent remains in the area compared to the typical big-box store. Then there's the uniqueness and pride in craft that simply can't be found when buying from a company that relies on a mass-production approach.

DEFINING THE TERM

Small business owners don't have to meet the old-fashioned definition of a "mom and pop operation," but they also can't have too many employees. The Small Business Administration

defines them by the average number of workers employed over the course of a year. They're evaluated based on average annual receipts, with levels set according to a business's highest income figures — including any affiliates or subsidiaries.

That said, you don't have to be familiar with the federal standard to know a small business when you see one. These are your friends and neighbors, offering handmade, homegrown or personal goods and services.

BIG CHALLENGES

The challenges for small business owners are many, from competition by deep-pocketed corporations to local financing. Experts say the 15-year survival rate for hometown companies was just 26%. So, these small operations can't keep their business going if they don't have committed support from the local community.

Studies report around 32 million small businesses in the U.S., operating alongside some 20,000 large businesses. They've created tens of millions of jobs over the past decade, while large businesses created about half that. Many more modestly sized operations were lost during the pandemic or are just now beginning to recover.

Companies with 20 to 49 employees had the largest decline in employment of any size business. That makes supporting them all the more important as our economy continues to rebound.

Finding success as a local start-up of any kind begins with being well-funded and having a smart business plan. But no matter how great a plan (or product) is, they need customers. When you shop with a local company, you're doing more than supporting a dream. You're helping to create a stronger hometown economy. One small business success quickly becomes everyone else's, too.

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Power Lineworkers

We've all felt relief when the lights turn on again after an outage.

That doesn't happen all by itself. The person most responsible for the resumption of power was probably a lineworker.

WHAT THEY DO

A lineworker's main responsibility is to install, repair and maintain the electrical power lines and telecommunications cables running overhead on any given street. They climb power poles, test and inspect lines, and run those lines between the poles. They can be called upon to work below ground, depending on the format of the power grid, and may operate heavy machinery like large trucks and earthmovers.

BEFORE YOU APPLY

There are employer training programs, apprenticeships and some community college programs available, but most power lineworkers gain experience on the job.

Many employers require at least a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma. Some applicants seek to increase their chances of landing a job by completing a lineworker program or associate degree program at a local community college or trade school. Because you may have to drive a company truck, you'll need to have a



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good driving record or sometimes even a commercial driver's license. They're asked to work in all kinds of weather, climbing poles, squeezing into manholes and scaling ladders.

THE BIGGEST DANGER

Line work is extremely dangerous and difficult, but rewarding and usually well compensated. Obviously,

lineworkers deal with electrical loads that can kill, so being able to listen and carefully follow safety instructions is critically important.

TRAINING PROGRAMS

Some companies require an apprenticeship that typically lasts about three years, and you may have to do that on top of other training. Those who complete an

apprenticeship are elevated to journeyman lineworker and may receive a certification card.

As your career progresses, you may be able to earn additional certifications in areas like safety, earthmoving operations or rescue training. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration offers both 10-hour or 30-hour training. The 10-hour training

program has been developed for entry-level employees, with coursework on safety basics for high-risk industries. The 30-hour version boasts a greater depth of training designed for employees with at least some safety responsibility. At the end of the training course, you'll receive a completion card that can be kept in your employer's personnel records.

Service Animals

Dogs have long been part of our families, offering unconditional love to their owners.

They're a great help to those with disabilities and provide comfort for people in need.

With proper training, a canine can assist with in-home care and in facilities such as nursing homes, schools and hospitals.

If you're unfamiliar with the difference between a service and therapy dog, the Americans with Disabilities Act states that "service animals are defined as dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities." This can include deafness, blindness and aiding those who suffer from seizures. While therapy dogs aren't supported under the ADA, they can provide psychological benefits to people during times of stress.

Here's an in-depth look at the responsibilities and benefits of both service and therapy dogs.

THERAPY DOGS

Therapy dogs are trained to volunteer in places like nursing facilities, private homes and schools. Their mission is to improve everyone's mood, providing companionship and a serene presence in a



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sometimes-stressful environment. These kind and loving dogs can help ease the worries of those with dementia and cardiovascular disease, veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and people receiving cancer treatment. They're also of great comfort in long-term care environments.

SERVICE DOGS

While therapy dogs are good at helping with emotional issues, service dogs are more highly trained companions who serve those with physically debilitating conditions. These kinds of dogs assist with navigation for those with blindness or low vision, alerting others to the

presence of a variety of dangers, and providing non-violent protection or rescue work. They also give physical support to those with mobility or balance issues.

Since service dogs are allowed in nearly every space to assist their handlers, it's important to treat them with respect. Avoid distracting

them from their mission. You can typically recognize a working canine by a specialized harness or vest. Attempting to pet or call attention to a service dog may cause them to see you as a threat to their handler. In the end, they are highly trained canines with a single goal of protecting their person.

School Counselors

School counselors have always been a critical element in any learning environment.

On a typical school day, they might discuss everything from preferred college pathways to the difficulty in finding a prom date.

The need for a counselor's steady presence seemed to finally become more widely understood amid the worldwide health crisis surrounding COVID-19. Teacher shortages, shifting schedules and worries about everyone's well-being only added to the typical stresses young people already endure. The fallout from that era continues — and school counselors are still there, willing to listen, provide advice or offer a helping hand.

LOOKING BACK

Initial legislation that provided funding for guidance programs arrived in the early 20th century, as New York became the first state to develop a certification process. The focus remained on the academic side for some 50 years. Then in the 1970s, schools began broadening the goals for counselors. They were asked to take on social and personal issues, as well. The No Child Left Behind Act of the 1990s



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then codified the role, and that put counselors in a unique position to help when schools were disrupted by the pandemic. Students who had built trust with counselors while sorting through adolescent issues turned to them when their schooling and social life were disrupted.

Working one-on-one with young people, counselors now

discuss a child's entire experience in school. They are the school's first line of support when students experience trauma, whether on campus or at home. They're available for parents who seek guidance in how to discuss sensitive issues with a child.

A GROWING NEED

Experts say school counselor

jobs are expected to expand 11% through 2030. That's faster than the average for all occupations. In some ways, the job has remained unchanged since its beginnings: Counselors help students develop both academic and social skills, while guiding them toward employment by helping organize individual class schedules and keeping track of attendance

and their grades. They may create comprehensive programs focusing on education and intervention, as needed. Increasingly, they've been called upon to do more, including providing emotional support for kids who are having issues at home or simply searching for a sense of purpose during one of the most difficult times of their lives.

Volunteer Firefighters

Of the tens of thousands of fire departments across America, the vast majority are staffed by volunteers.

Of course, the principal responsibility of this job is extinguishing fires. But firefighters also help with rescue operations, monitor fire risks in order to declare burn bans and sponsor local fire safety programs. If you live in a smaller community, the people doing all this work are unpaid community-minded neighbors.

WHAT THEY DO

Beyond firefighting, rescue and mitigation programs, firefighters deal with hazardous material response and removal. Other functions include arson investigations, providing general medical services until other help arrives, fire-code enforcement, and youth and senior awareness programs.

HOW TO HELP

Discuss fire safety with friends and family and put those practices into place every day. Remember, too, that most fire departments rely on slim municipal budgets, so donations from the community are critical to their operation. When funding is low, departments may be forced to cut back on training resources or supplies. They



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may even have to lay off any paid personnel on staff.

Consider holding a fundraiser for your local firehouse, with donations directed to supporting their vital role. Talk to first responders about what's most needed. That will provide something specific to focus on when promoting your campaign on social

media or in local media outlets. A fundraising event might center on a raffle, individual donation efforts or a fun cookout. Some local communities host charity bingos or craft sales. Whatever you choose, invite folks from the local firehouse to your event. They'll put a human face on these pressing needs, and the

people who depend on them will have a chance to express their gratitude.

BECOMING A VOLUNTEER

Fire departments can always use an extra helping hand when emergencies arise, especially in less-populated rural areas.

If you're able bodied and

have the right credentials, check with your local department to find out more. Most will have some basic requirements for any volunteer, including EMT certification, more than 100 hours of related training and a high-school diploma. Other individual departments may have different requirements.