



Episode 8 – “Supporting the Unseen: Navigating Homelessness and Food Insecurity in Schools Amid a Pandemic” Transcript

Matt Butensky:

Welcome to our podcast, I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I am your co-host today, Matt Butensky. I'm a project manager with the Center for Schools and Communities, and we want to thank you for joining in on today's episode. During today's episode, we are speaking with Cindy Surgeon-Smith who is a home and school visitor and homeless and foster care point of contact and Morgan Bechdel, who is a certified school social worker at the State College Area School District. So we want to welcome Cindy and Morgan to today's podcast episode. Welcome to the podcast.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Thank you.

Morgan Bechdel:

Hello. Thanks for having us.

Matt Butensky:

It's so nice to have you here and we are going to be digging in and diving deeper on your roles at State College Area School District. And so we wanted to get started with talking about what you do at State College Area School District and your responsibilities in those roles that I just described, and also how you support students experiencing homelessness in your roles.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Thanks Matt. I will take the lead on this and I'll say that I am the home and school visitor for State College Area School District, as you indicated. As the home and school visitor, I do a lot of different things. I feel like I change my hat every day, every hour, sometimes multiple times in a day. I'm sorry. Multiple times an hour. One of the main jobs I have is being the homeless liaison and the foster care point of contact. That position allows me to work directly with our unaccompanied youth as well as the children and families who are experiencing homelessness. I'm also the CYS liaison, so that gives me the opportunity to make sure that when children are being moved or they are experiencing homelessness, that we have the opportunity to have a best interest determination meeting and that they are occurring and that we are giving children and families the voice and saying where they want their kids to remain for the remainder of the school year so they get that educational stability. I think that's pretty important to make sure we're doing that. And then I feel like probably my biggest role is just continuing always to build

relationships with parents and our staff and our community and to collect the basic needed items for our Helping Hands Pantry. Morgan.

Morgan Bechdel:

I do want to start off saying that State College Area School District, we often refer it as SCASD. So if you hear us saying SCASD it's just our district. It's just so much easier to say.

Matt Butensky:

Gotcha. Sure.

Morgan Bechdel:

So I'm SCASD's district wide School social worker. We do now have two more social workers, but before I was the only one. And Cindy and I work very closely together addressing family's basic needs and the connection to resources and the services around. I also play a huge role in advocating for awareness and addressing mental health in the sports and extracurricular activities. And I'm also a part of our school-based mental health team that provides mental health services to kiddos and we have a whole process of that that I get assigned students from.

Matt Butensky:

Thanks for sharing that. This will be episode eight of our podcast. And you are actually, Cindy, our first homeless liaison that we've had on the podcast. So you were describing the roles that you both play. And for those listeners who might be less familiar with McKinney-Vento or Pennsylvania's ECYH program, all school entities in Pennsylvania are required to have a homeless liaison who does liaise with those students and families that are experiencing homelessness. And it's interesting to hear about how, Cindy, you work with Morgan, your school social worker, and how you formed that network or weaved together the supports that SCASD offers for students experiencing homelessness. So I wanted to talk about thinking about we have a very diverse state, different populations of students throughout the state. What have you witnessed or experienced as the greatest need in your community when it comes to serving youth and families identified as experiencing homelessness?

Cindy Sergeon-Smith:

Matt, I'm going to take the lead on that. I'm going to say I have been in the district since 2015 and when I first came to the district we were about at 14% poverty and that number has definitely increased over the last several years. We're sitting right about 20 to 22% poverty. So we're pretty fortunate in our area that that number is so low because I know some of the surrounding areas, they're probably the reverse. They're probably 80/20 where we're 20/80. So I think we're pretty lucky in that regards, but we still definitely have those 20 to 22% poverty rates that Morgan and I are working with on a really regular basis.

I think like so many other communities, COVID has had really a big impact on our families, our community, our schools, definitely our students. And so prior to COVID we were facing food insecurities, financial hardships and housing concerns. But families that we worked with then are different families than we're working with now. And what I mean by that is some of the families that are now facing challenges, before COVID were not facing those same challenges. They were self-employed families that were able to make sure they met all the needs of their students and themselves. And now we're working with a greater population of families that have lost jobs and lost housing and do struggle with that food insecurity on a pretty regular basis.

I will say that here in State College, our homeless numbers basically have tripled. We started out when I came to the district in low 50s. We had a 37 a couple of years ago. And last year we finished out the year with 153 students. That doesn't account parents, that's just the students that we have in our building. We do incorporate the younger students when we're providing services, but they do not count in our numbers. So if there's little ones at home, we make sure we're helping them. But again, the 153 is just our in school students.

I also feel like we've had a great tremendous increase in mental health. We've had an increase in students really struggling to come to the building with attendance. So I feel like some of our greatest needs that we are currently facing is really developing partnerships with agencies and local businesses and even within our own school community to gather supports for our families and our students and even our staff. And then just making sure we're meeting those basic needs. And in addition to meeting our basic needs, I do think our mental health supports is our greatest need. Morgan, do you have anything to add to that?

Morgan Bechdel:

No. I think you said it best. Our needs are just getting the support from the community to give to our students and our families and our staff. The mental health crisis is huge, and just getting those basic needs to be able then to address some mental health concerns is a very important area that we address daily.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. It's interesting to hear how your identification of youth has really increased. And it's one thing to identify, but it's another to then also link to services and resources. And I think that's really important and we're going to be talking more about some of the resources and services that you offer, but it's about identification, but also then what are the next steps after that? I know something we want to talk about today was your Helping Hands Pantry. So can you describe more about how that evolved, why you decided to get it started, and just details about that newer project that SACSD is offering to students and families?

Cindy Sergeon-Smith:

Yes. Thanks for asking about our Helping Hands Pantry, Matt. That's been one of the greatest things that we have created for our students and staff and family. I have always gone to the state homeless conferences since I took this position nine years ago, and I would hear about all the different great things that the homeless liaisons were doing across the state, and I'm like, "Well, why am I not doing some of the same great things?" And so prior to COVID, I had started talking and working with community to say, hey, can we create a pantry in which can be used by our students and our families and again, our staff members? And then I was just in the beginning phases and COVID hit. And so I had to put a pause on that, but at the same time when I put a pause on that, we have the State College area food bank that is a really great resource to us and was a great resource to us even then.

But when COVID hit, our director of transportation come to Morgan and I and said, "Hey, I have this idea and I want your guys' help on it."

Morgan Bechdel:

Crazy idea. Crazy idea.

Cindy Sergeon-Smith:

Super crazy. So he's like, "I would like to stuff the bus." And so we promoted that and families were able to come to any of our school-based locations. So we have eight elementaries, two middle schools and our high school. And so families could drop off the food in any of those locations and then our bus drivers along with our director of transportation went and picked up all of the food. Our director of the food bank warned us that it would not be something that we could do in a one-day period. We thought maybe she was wrong, but we quickly learned that we were the ones that were wrong. When the bus drivers brought that food to us, we literally had a library full. We had another office space full. And it was unloaded off of four full size buses. Packed school buses.

Our district raised about 10 ton of food in that event. Morgan and I, the biggest part we played in this is we were responsible for sorting, labeling, storing, connecting with the State College food bank to give them their cases of peanut butter they need this week or their cans of green beans that they need. We learned a lot about the events that occur behind the closed doors at the State College Food Bank. In that whole process, we had food in our district building for about three months. And over that three month period, we were in regular communication with the State College Food Bank. And because of that, we just started really building this really great relationship where we could share our needs, they would share their needs. And so then we started talking about what are the food insecurities that our students are going to face when they come back to the building and how can the food bank and the State College school district come together to create a partnership so that we can again, better serve those students?

While we raised all the food for the event that one event we raised, I feel like the biggest thing that come out of that is the fact that we have this relationship with the food bank that is easy and is accessible and provides so much stuff for our families. And Morgan and I, we can call them at any time and they'll provide stuff for us. Before COVID, Morgan and I could not make a food bank referral. If we had a family in our building that needed support or needed help, we would have to send them to another agency.

But since COVID and since the Stuff the Bus event and the relationship that we built, Morgan and I are now a direct referral. So that has allowed us to remove barriers for families that are struggling, that are at risk, that maybe don't have transportation, and they figured out how to get here, but now they have to figure out how to get to the food bank. So that was a really great opportunity for us. If I would say one good thing come of COVID, I would say Morgan becoming full-time and our pantry getting established or started was probably the greatest things for us that come out of COVID. Morgan, would you like to talk more about the pantry and the needs assessment?

Morgan Bechdel:

Yeah. The State College Food Bank reached out to us about exploring a first in-house, in district pantry with hopes to then spread that to more school districts within Centre County. The pantry is spread out of two offices at our administrative building. So our Panorama administrative building. And one of those two offices used to be my office, but Cindy and I work so closely together that we share an office space. So I gave up my desk just to have more storage for the families that we're working with. Right now there's a mattress in my office, there's blankets. There's so many things in there.

Cindy Sergeon-Smith:

To be used by our student and family, not for us napping.

Matt Butensky:

Of course.

Morgan Bechdel:

Yeah. It's not set up to nap on. But Cindy and I are constantly bouncing ideas off of one another and tackling to-do lists and staying on track. So it was a no-brainer just to give up my office so that way we could have more space then to turn around and give to our students, their families and our staff members. So one half of the original pantry has storage for food that we get stocked by the State College Food Bank, and the other half is hygiene items, household cleaning products, school supplies, and those all come from donations in our partnerships that we have and our little fundraising events that we do. We also have the Target registry that is one way that can fill it up.

The pantry is a great addition to our district, but what really allows the pantry to be so beneficial is the needs assessment. The needs assessment is our biggest and most important tool that we use in our department, and it's something that is district-wide. It's a Google form that was just created during the beginning of COVID and we share it out every school year. We make a new one for every school year and we send it out so often throughout the school year, just as a reminder, of hey, that's there. Each individual building also shares it out in their newsletters. It's attached through our emails. This Google form is like the heart and soul of Cindy and I's work. Anyone in SCASD within the community can fill it out for a student, a family or staff member who is connected to SCASD. Our Google form asks demographic questions like areas of needs. There's even a question on there about homelessness. And this form alone is one of the greatest ways that Cindy and I connect with our families. It's a way that we track what we do with the families. It's where we keep our notes, it's where we record all of our data, what's going in, what's coming out. This needs assessment really is the Crème de la of our work. It's such a silly thing, but it really is.

Matt Butensky:

It helps guide you. What you want to do for the year, guides you.

Morgan Bechdel:

Yes.

Cindy Sergeant-Smith:

Yeah. And then also is a way that we can ... If a staff member we're walking down the hallway and a staff member says, "Oh, Cindy, can you help Johnny with this or Sally with that?" We say, "Fill out that needs assessment because that will be a reminder to us to make sure we're following up with our families." Because we don't want to lose sight. People try to tell us things in passing and we might lose sight of that because by the time we turn around the corner, somebody else is talking to us. So we don't ever want to lose sight of a family that has a basic need, and our needs assessment ensures that we don't do that.

Morgan Bechdel:

Our needs assessment is also anonymous. So when Cindy and I are working on that, if a teacher fills that out for a student and family and they don't want that family to know that the teacher's the one who made the referral, that's perfectly fine. And Cindy and I just ask that we know that information. So when we're calling that family, we can just say, "Hey, someone filled

out the needs assessment for you," and we just talk to them about what's going on and what things that they might need.

Matt Butensky:

So tell me again, so the needs assessment ... Who can fill out your needs assessment? It goes home to families. It can also be filled out by school staff. Just remind me of what you mentioned about that.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Anybody can fill it out. So anybody that lives in our community or they don't even have to live in our community. Matt, you yourself, if you know of a student or a family in State College Area School District that's struggling, you could fill out our needs assessment. It is on our district website, so anybody has access to that. And there is a question on there of who's filling it out and so that we just know who to follow up with and things. But it can be a student themselves, it can be a teacher, a school counselor, a principal, anybody in the community, a neighbor, a doctor, a nurse. Anybody can fill that out because it is a public document that is on our website and we definitely promote it. Some of our administrators put it in their newsletters. It's really well known in our district, so anybody has access to filling that out. So thanks for asking that question again, Matt.

Matt Butensky:

Very, very cool. I'm definitely going to ask if we can make a PDF of it and put it on our show notes because I think others listening that are homeless liaisons would be interested in perhaps doing that in their district or community.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

And the one thing, Matt, that Morgan and I would love to do is, for lack of better words, take our show on the road and really go around to different homeless liaisons in the state. My goal is to make it bigger and bigger and bigger. To share the wealth that this has created because I believe in working smarter, not harder. And so if we as homeless liaisons are sharing and collaborating and really working together, I think that the services that our students get will be even more enriched. So Morgan and I have already talked to some of the different areas, but we would be happy to present at a conference, come to their buildings, talk to their school counselors, talk to their teachers. Anybody who would want to be a part of this, Morgan and I would be happy to go to them and have a conversation about it.

Matt Butensky:

Well, it definitely sounds like a really cool resource and I also want to learn more about it, so thanks for that offer. I did want to know ... Because we had a lot to unpack there. Early on you said, Cindy, that you could not make a referral directly to the food bank and now you can. And it's always interesting in this work, a lot of times we talk about how we really want schools to reduce barriers for students, and that's a really nice concrete example. But can you describe what was the barrier that didn't allow you to do that before and now you can? Was it just an administrative bureaucratic thing with the local provider or how did that evolve?

Cindy Sergeon-Smith:

Yeah. That's a great question. I think you hit a lot of the reasonings when you asked the question, Matt. One, there is a different administrator there now. And the new administrator I didn't really have a relationship with and then COVID hit and that relationship developed. So what would happen is all of the food bank referrals would go through a different agency that did collaborate directly with the food bank. And I do think that they were concerned at the food bank, that if they opened up the opportunity for State College school district to be a referral source, that they would get referrals from everybody in the school district. So when I first asked, we were told no, and I think that was one of the reasons is they were afraid that they were going to be bombarded with all these different people reaching out and not really knowing what the expectations are or how to fill out the form or what the hours are and all of the things that the food bank's operation would look like.

So the referral, the State College Area School District is a referral source. However, all the referrals have to come directly through Morgan and I. So that's another way we were able to convince the State College Food Bank to work with us is we said we would love to do this. We want to remove that barrier. They as well wanted to remove that barrier. So we agreed as the team that all referrals would come directly through Morgan and I so that it would not put more work on the State College Food Bank.

Matt Butensky:

Really a sparkling example of good collaboration. Another thing we talk about all the time in this work and how important it is, but really you don't know what you don't know. And when you start having conversations with other community leaders and they learn that you're a homeless liaison in the school district and you're supposed to do this for students experiencing homelessness in your school district and you can be a resource for them. And so when you start to have those conversations, it really does open up new opportunities for students and families. It's very possible that students in your school and families in your school are more comfortable working with you than going to a food bank directly because we know that there are certain biases around homelessness, and so the family might be more comfortable working directly with you. So it just is really a cool example to hear about that.

I also think it's neat and a great idea that you shared that in order to resource your Helping Hands Pantry, it sounded like you had a few different resources to fill it. But we're moving into ... Well, not moving into. It's now November. We're going into Homelessness Awareness Month, and it's certainly a way that you can just ask families in your districts to donate to your Helping Hands Pantry. So use families that are able to donate and are privileged to be able to donate to help provide items that perhaps local funding would not support or be allowable for. So I wanted to note that too. Did you have anything you wanted to note about how you resource your pantry and fill your pantry?

Morgan Bechdel:

One of the ways that we fill our pantry is by using the Target registry, which I mentioned earlier. It's just-

Matt Butensky:

How does that work? Yeah.

Morgan Bechdel:

Yeah. It's there all the time. You register for a wedding, a baby. We have one that's just for the SCASD Helping Hands Pantry and I keep that updated with the needs of the pantry. So I mark items most needed. The numbers or quantity are all willy-nilly just because I feel like we could never have enough because of the needs and the outgoing goodie bags that are coming from the pantry. But if you go on the Target registry, find the SCASD Helping Hands Pantry, it might be under my name. But anyone can go on there and just select what you would like to donate. And if you go through the process ... You have to go through the buying process to find shipping. And you can click to ship it straight to the Panorama administration building and it'll go straight to us and right here at the pantry. I go to the mail room. It's like Christmas sometimes when I find Target boxes that I get to dig through and then organize the pantry.

Matt Butensky:

Cool. So you create a registry through Target, and then people in your district or community, you share that you have a registry and they can purchase items, and then it's sent to your schools' Helping Hands Pantry.

Morgan Bechdel:

Yep. Correct.

Matt Butensky:

Cool. Another cool resource. Thanks for sharing about that.

Morgan Bechdel:

Cindy has other ways that we have partnered with outside organizations. I don't know if that's a time to share now about that.

Matt Butensky:

Of course. Yeah.

Cindy Sergeon-Smith:

Thanks Morgan and Matt. I would say in addition to the Target registry, which has been a great resource for us, but in addition to that, State College Area School District several years ago, established an education foundation and we established that foundation because we wanted to enhance the students' educational experience in hopes that by giving back to our students to support them in programs and projects and learning opportunities that maybe our budget wouldn't allow or federal dollars wouldn't allow. So we started the educational foundation and that educational foundation program actually sends out asks and requests from our community to support and provide funding to our students. During COVID when we did the ask, we raised over \$100,000 and a large portion of that \$100,000 went directly back to our families. Again, we used the needs assessment and we tracked everything, but we would help families with their car payments. We'd help families with their utility bills. We'd help families with food and clothing and whatever they needed, and we were able to use that money.

Morgan and I quickly started talking to other people and saying, we were so blessed during COVID and all these supports, and we helped so many families that come August, they're going to be reaching out to us to see if we can support them again. So we have to figure out a way to sustain our pantry and continue to build it up because we're going to have this request and

when the money's gone, what are we going to do then? So the foundation once again asked for a big ask, and we again received a lot of money. I'm not really sure. It was like 80,000 that time. I'm not exactly sure how much, but it's been a lot of-

Morgan Bechdel:

I think overall for that specific fund, the Mental Health Matters Fund, we've raised over \$200,000.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Yeah. That's what I thought too. So the foundation allows us to provide financial support directly to the families. I'll give a great example. When Morgan and I are helping a family and they've completed a needs assessment and we're reaching out, I can ask mom and dad or guardians what their kids need and they can say they need beds, they need mattresses, they need whatever it is. And we can provide that with federal dollars. But if mom and dad or guardians do not have a bed, we do not have the flexibility to buy that bed or buy them sheets or buy them pillows or buy them things that they might need. This foundation has enabled us to buy things that we would not typically be able to purchase without that fund. In addition to the foundation fund, we've also really worked on creating partnerships. And I'll talk a little bit more about that, Matt, as we move on. But partnerships has really been a great way in addition to our foundation that we've been able to support our families.

Matt Butensky:

That's amazing. That's a lot of money. So how did that money get there again? Was that through donations? How did you solicit that money?

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Yeah. So our communication in our district, we actually have two communication people that put out all communication for our district. So the administration and our communication directors, they come together, they compiled an email and they literally just blasted it out to our community. That could have been parents, it could have been local doctors. They just blast it out to our community. And by sending it out, there was a link and things on there that families could just go in and donate the money. And we also have a separate fund that families can donate directly to Morgan and I, but most of the funds go through the foundation and parents can just volunteer and they can do that anytime of year. It's not just when we have the big ask. If I wanted to donate today, I could donate today. So it's really great. We have a really amazing community.

Morgan Bechdel:

What's the saying about the village?

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

It takes a village.

Morgan Bechdel:

We've used that so much, so heavily during COVID and we still use it to this day. It really does take a village and we live in a great village.

Matt Butensky:

Sure. I'll have to grab a copy of your letter maybe or something for our listeners to put in our notes just so they can maybe model something like that for their own community use. That's really awesome though.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

And we also never ever take full credit for anything that Morgan and I do. When we're dropping off the goodie bags that Morgan referred to earlier and the parents are really thankful and just really thanking us, we always say, "We appreciate you taking the time to thank us, but we need you to know this is not us." We are the ones that had the wonderful opportunity to get to bring it out and see the expressions and the joy and the sadness and all of the emotions that go along with the goodie bag being dropped off, but it's the people behind the scenes that are really making it happen. We just get to be the great recipient of providing that service.

Morgan Bechdel:

We're the fantastic middle women.

Matt Butensky:

That's really cool.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Right.

Matt Butensky:

That's really cool. It sounds like you're getting a lot of community donations thinking about some way to recognize some of those businesses or individuals who have donated so that they can continue or they want to continue to donate year after year. So something to consider as well for that donation fund. Awesome.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

May I share a little bit more about our partnerships now?

Matt Butensky:

Please do. Yeah. I would love to hear about that.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

I was going to do it later on, but I think just now makes the most sense since we're talking about it. One of the other things that Morgan and I have really taken a lot of pride in doing is developing new partnerships. We say that our professional goals every year is to keep the partnerships we already have, but add to them at least one or two new businesses, churches, agencies that we work with. We're currently working with adult services to put an event together. We're constantly looking at whose already helping families and how can we work together instead of silos and how can we tap into the community resources that are out there like our local businesses and our local churches that maybe other people aren't already tapped into?

I'll give you an example of that as well. When I started here, we gave out about 26 Thanksgiving holiday meals. Morgan and I delivered over 125 both at Thanksgiving and at the holiday winter

break last year. And we were able to do that because we partnered with different churches, we partnered with different organizations, we partnered with even people within our district, and we've gathered gift cards and baskets and food and all of the things. So we were actually able to support an additional amount of families last year than we were originally at the 26th. So we really doubled that. And not only did we double the amount that we were able to serve, but we doubled the amount of people who needed it.

Morgan Bechdel:

Talk about Alex's culinary arts.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Oh, good. That's a great point. We have a bilingual liaison that also works very closely with Morgan and I, and we have our own career technical center embedded in our high school. And our chef in the years past had worked closely with Morgan and I to provide additional items like pies and breads and things like that that we could add to what we were already providing to families. Last year, we came together as a team and talked about how Chef Lorber and Alex could really work together to provide families a non-traditional Thanksgiving meal or a non-traditional holiday winter break meal that we might celebrate with. And so between Alex and Chef's communication and collaboration, they were able to serve families the meals that the families would've thought would've been their traditional holiday meal versus what we would consider a holiday meal.

Matt Butensky:

That's so nice. And that's so important to building ... We talk about the importance of building community and belonging and inclusion, so that's really cool that you did that. Nice job. I had one question that I wanted to go back to because I know that there's going to be some schools listening that are going to say, what do I need to get my Helping Hands Pantry started? So very early on you talked about how you were saying it sounded like a crazy idea, but what was some of the infrastructure or buy-in you needed to get in order to move the project from an idea to actual implementation? I wanted to back up to that before we move into our last question today.

Morgan Bechdel:

Yeah. Before Cindy speaks, I will say you have to have motivation. You definitely have to want to do it yourself despite what you might hear.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

And I think that in addition to the motivation, you have to understand that there will be barriers that you have to overcome or work around because while we created the pantry, not everyone was 100% supportive of a full-blown pantry being in a school district. So it took a lot of conversations and a lot of feeling like, oh my gosh, we're doing these wonderful things to be told why are you doing these wonderful things? So it takes a lot of motivation as well as just the ... I don't know. The courage to do it, I guess is the word I'm looking for. It can be exhausting and draining if you don't have support is what I'm trying to say. But if a person has the motivation, they have the support, and they have the courage to do it, I think the best way to really get that pantry up and moving is you have to have those partnerships.

You have to figure out who in your community would be the first person you could go to that is going to help stock that pantry. Because realistically, school districts and individual staff

members are not going to be able to do it alone. So who in their community would be a good resource to go and say, "Hey, I have an idea. Let's have a conversation about my idea and let's see how we can grow an idea into a reality. And how can we make our reality support the students family and staff that are really struggling to meet their basic needs?"

Morgan Bechdel:

I will also say space is definitely a factor. As I said earlier about giving up my office space, you might have to do that. You might have to give up some of the space that you are used to to be able to do this for all those or around you.

Cindy Sergeon-Smith:

I think another thing to think about when other districts or communities are thinking about how can they get a pantry embedded in their program is I think you have to think about what scale you want it to be on. Morgan and I are district-wide employees, so anybody in the district has access to our pantry, but some might want to start out in a little bit slower and they may want to put it in a building where they're at most risk students are at and sponsor it through that building and then grow it bigger. Because again, not every district's going to be able to raise a hundred thousand dollars in a very short period of time. So like I said earlier, we're very fortunate in regards to the supports we have here so I would just encourage districts to look at how can we start this out on a small scale and then just build it. Because I will say that our pantry, while it started out pretty big has grown and grown and grown. And so we are going to be out of space again so soon.

Morgan Bechdel:

And that's also the other part of the needs assessment conversation that Cindy and I would like to take on the road. We are so happy to help anyone who wants to have those conversations of where do I start? How do I start a pantry? How can I get this going, and what are the necessary steps? We've been through those growing pains and we would love to help other people-

Matt Butensky:

Navigate.

Morgan Bechdel:

What is that?

Matt Butensky:

Navigate.

Morgan Bechdel:

Yeah. Again, working smarter, not harder.

Matt Butensky:

Mm-hmm. And so the distribution of the items from the pantry, what does that look like? Do you yourselves distribute the items? How do families get the items?

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Yeah. That's a great question. Again, I know some of the words have been pretty repetitive, and this is going to be another one of those. The needs assessment. We get the needs assessment in Morgan then looks at it and she either allocates that family to myself or herself, and then Morgan and I are reaching out to those families and talking to them. And then as we're talking to the families and we're determining what they need, we're also determining do they need to come to the building and pick up their items that they are requesting? Do we need to drop them off? Do we need to take them to the school building and to the student and give them to them? So when we are working with the families to determine what their needs are, we're also assessing the delivery of those said items.

Morgan Bechdel:

There are a lot of home visits that we go on just to provide them a goodie bag, to provide resources, touch base with them. We also have plenty of staff members who are so excited to actually take a goodie bag home to their students. We've had them come and pick them up at the building. As Cindy said, we've had people come in and go shopping and pick out what's best for their family. We're pretty open to the ways of getting the families what they need.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

And we want to do that as quickly as possible. So we want to again, eliminate any barriers that would keep a family from utilizing the supports that we can offer them. We have had staff members come over themselves and make goody bags for the families that they're working with and then deliver those things. So I would say the majority of the bags are actually delivered by Morgan and I.

Matt Butensky:

Got you. Yeah. No. I know we're digging into some of the finer details, but I think it's something that people interested in establishing would also like to know and linking with your home visiting programs, other programs that districts have could be another way to distribute so thanks for sharing about that.

So with that, I wanted to go into our closing question for our podcast episode today. And you talked about how for this pantry, it was really important to put on your advocacy hats. And we are in November, which we are celebrating 10 years of our recognition of youth homelessness awareness month here in Pennsylvania with our Pennsylvania Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness program. Specifically, we have activities coming up November 13th through 17th. So I wanted to ask, what were you planning on doing this year to recognize this month and to continue spreading awareness and providing outreach to your community about the needs of students experiencing homelessness?

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Yes, Matt. Thank you for asking about our events that we have planned. So the last several years, we have partnered with our high school staff to collect needed items. So what happens is Morgan and I provide the list that we are most needed at the time, and then we provide that to the staff and then staff and students at the high school bring those items in. In the beginning, we just did each day at the high school, we would give a blurb about what McKinney-Vento law is. So maybe one day we talked about what fixed, regular, and adequate means, and then by the end of the week we were putting slides up that says, make sure you're wearing red.

This year, I think we've really grown it. Each year it's gotten a little bit better and a little bit better. This year we actually had students involved in our program. So the students actually came over, they visited the pantry, then we went into a separate space and we talked a lot about the backside of what happened with the pantry and how students, they could be sitting right in the same class with students that would need the resources of the pantry. So the students have made videos, they've made posters, they are sending out different types of emails, putting it on social media. And so just getting the word out there. But we are actually running our event for two weeks. So we're going to start on November 6th and we're going to run through November 17th.

A couple of years ago when we started this, we raised about 700 pounds of goods for our pantry. They're being challenged at the high school this year to bring more than that in. And then in addition to working with the students and having the student population bring things in, our union president collaborated with Morgan and I about involving the union staff members. And so that we also have a challenge among our staff members across the entire district, not just at our high school level, to see who can bring in the most donations during that two week timeframe.

And while we believe that November is a really great month to share the information and put the awareness out there and make our posters, we also believe that in March those same families still might be struggling. So we are looking at hosting events throughout the entire year to support our pantry and our homeless and unaccompanied youth. And I would like Morgan to talk a little bit more about that.

Morgan Bechdel:

As Cindy said, one of the biggest things that we like to do is partner with our buildings within the district. And some of the things that we do for that have been in the spring and random acts of kindness is a week that takes place in February. And last school year, we partnered with a fifth grade classroom at Coral Street where these students actually came up with this idea of wanting to help in a bigger picture. It was just a small little class project they wanted to do. And I so happened to be married to that teacher so when I caught wind of that, I was like, "All right, we're going to do something." We raised about 500 boxes of cereal and what we did was we set them up in a domino chain reaction, and it was just a big celebration at the end of the week where these elementary students were challenging each other to bring in the most amount of boxes while raising the awareness for the whole cause.

We actually went in and talked to the students about the pantry, about the needs of the community. We had the food bank come in and we really talked about food insecurity. So this whole week, these students raised awareness about food insecurity and how it's important to give back, and especially during random acts of kindness week. And with all of these boxes, we had a ton come to the pantry. The majority of it went to the food bank and we won't have to worry about getting cereal for a while luckily from our partnerships. We partnered with other elementary buildings for laundry drives, and we're just looking to have that little piece everywhere so we can continue these things in the spring. It really is showing the message that there's not ever one specific time or month that someone may be struggling.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. It's neat to hear how you're educating students when you can about the topic of food insecurity and then also giving them opportunities to build their own resilience through demonstrating fulfillment and having them participate. And I think that's really cool too. So thanks for sharing about that. This podcast will be coming out in a few weeks. I might be able to

convince our team to release it sooner because we do have a suite of items that are available for awareness month that we've created for statewide use, like social media graphics and sample flyers and statistics and other things that can be shared to help support this important work during the month of November and of course all year long.

Before we wrap up, I just wanted to leave a space for you if there was anything we did not get to speak about so far today. Any other information you wanted to share with our listeners about this topic in general, about your work, wanted to leave a space for you.

Cindy Sergeon-Smith:

Sure. I think that I want to start, Matt, by saying that the resources that you mentioned just a moment ago, we are actually using those resources here. When Morgan and I went to the conference a couple of weeks ago, we picked up those resources and those posters and flyer and those information is going to be posted around our district. So I really just wanted to say thank you to you and your team for making sure we had that information on hand because it is definitely very beneficial. I think the one thing I would like to wrap up on my end, and then I'll let Morgan say if there's something she would like to wrap up with. I just think that always having conversation, always bringing it back to that we do have families and children that are experiencing homelessness, that are unaccompanied, that are hungry at school and not to put on blinders and to think that they're not in your classroom or they're not in your community or they're not your next door neighbors because they're everywhere. And I think we just have to continue to have conversation about how can we as a community help people who are struggling?

I had a person just tell me not too long ago, and it was great words out of their mouth, is we're all just one paycheck away from struggling. And I think if we look at it from that perspective and just look about how we can support each other and the community, I think that is a great segue into just opening up conversations about how districts and communities can come together to work together, collaborate, and not in those silos I mentioned earlier.

Morgan Bechdel:

And to add to that is no matter what position that you may be in, whether that is in a school setting or if that's maybe even a prison setting, just taking that step back and thinking about it at a holistic approach. Thinking about maybe this person's coming at me hot right now because they've been looking around and figuring out what they're going to eat for their next meal. Maybe this person is a little angry about some job that we have to do, but they might not be sleeping the best at night. There's a lot of different things that are going on and we just have to be gentle with other people and just take that step back and be like, okay, the feelings and the emotions might be raw right now, but there could be a lot of reasons behind it. And just being understanding more when we're talking with anyone.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. It's about framing that question of what happened to that person, not what's wrong with that person, which is really important to do to have that trauma-informed lens. And I think earlier in our conversation you talked about how you've identified over 150 students experiencing homelessness in your school district, in State College. And I think if you're from Pennsylvania and you're thinking about State College, you're thinking about the big university town and you might not think that there were that many students that had that need. So it's interesting that you shared your insight and stories today.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Yeah. And I think Matt, there's still this misconception that homelessness is people sleeping on the streets, sleeping on park benches, and that is not what homelessness is all about as you know. It's families and students that are lacking that fixed, regular, and adequate housing. So there are people out there that are definitely needing support and it's not just on a park bench.

So my final thoughts, if you don't mind, Matt, is I will say again, Morgan and I would be happy to have more individual conversations with districts that are interested, agencies that are interested, even coming and talking with you more about this program, Matt, and talking about conferences and things like that because we really want to share our experience and how we have really been able to help others. And one piece of information I think is important to add is that we weigh everything that comes and goes. And the thing we didn't say earlier in this conversation is we have given out in the last two and a half years, 6,500 pounds of needed items for families.

Matt Butensky:

Wow. That's amazing. That's really cool. Well, thank you for sharing all of that information today. I know it's going to be super helpful regardless of where our listeners are coming from as they support students experiencing homelessness, but also particularly for those schools looking to implement some of the projects that you're doing at State College Area School District.

So again, a reminder that there are a lot of resources available for students experiencing homelessness at our websites and also for awareness month. We're so glad to hear that those are helpful for you, Cindy and Morgan, in your school district. So with that, we are going to close this episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. Thank you again for being with us today.

Cindy Surgeon-Smith:

Thank you, Matt.

Morgan Bechdel:

Thanks, Matt.

Matt Butensky:

So good to hear from you. To learn more about the programs and services of the State College Area School District, please visit www.scasd.org and I think you can even find the survey that you had mentioned, your needs assessment, you'll be able to navigate that to your district. We'll also try to pull some other resources that you mentioned and include those in our show notes for this episode so that they're easily accessible. So with that, thank you for listening to I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We hope you enjoyed the episode today. Please check back and tune in again.