HOW IT ALL STARTED CommUnity’s Story

It’s 1969 on the University of Iowa campus. Two young freshmen return to their Burge Hall dorm room and find the completely unexpected—their roommate has barricaded the door and attempted suicide. They rush her to the hospital and on behalf of all University of Iowa students, they establish a food pantry.

That experience launched a campaign of advocacy, for those two young women and on behalf of all University of Iowa students, to establish support services for others in crisis. The two women began knocking on doors and by the end of their first year, they had gathered a group of 40 volunteers who worked for 15 hours a day, 365 days a year in 1976.

Throughout our history, CommUnity, formerly The Crisis Center has always been a leader in helping with community-wide crises. We responded to the Farm Crisis in the 1980’s, took action during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1990’s, and have been integral in helping Johnson County rebuild after the 1993 floods, the tornado in 2006, and flooding in 2008.

This year continues a long tradition of excellence in responding to crisis. Thank you for your support in helping us provide these essential services.

The last year has been a year of challenges as well as a year of proof that our community has the strength to persist. We started out the year with plans to come together in celebration of our 50th anniversary, uniting our friends and neighbors past and present for this special milestone. Instead, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the postponement of our in-person event, our 50th anniversary has been a time of reflection on our organization’s history of profound impact in our community.

It’s been a year of putting our mission into action, ensuring that anyone in our community has somewhere to turn in times of crisis. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we made many changes to the way we provide services in order to ensure the safety of our clients, volunteers, donors, and staff. We partnered with other area pantries to start a delivery program, bringing food directly to the doors of our clients. Our crisis intervention volunteers are providing service remotely under the supervision of staff. Our Mobile Crisis team created an additional offering of telehealth counseling.

We have even had to modify our fund-raising efforts, moving our annual Hunger Banquet to our first-ever virtual event.

Our crisis line experienced a surge in contacts, seeing an enormous increase in texts coming in from the Disaster Distress Helpline, a national service which provides immediate counseling to anyone who is seeking help in coping with the mental or emotional effects of disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We expanded our Mobile Crisis program to the Southeast Iowa Link region, where we now offer these services in Jefferson, Louisa, Keokuk, and Washington counties.

Looking back, our Mobile Crisis hotline that people could call to seek counseling and advice on whatever might be troubling them. Trained volunteers staffed the phones to respond to callers in crisis and specialized in suicide prevention and intervention. For the first two years, the hotline operated out of a secret location in Iowa City. In 1972, services were moved to a new location and walk-in clients were accepted for counseling. The center expanded its phone service to be 24 hours a day, 365 days a year in 1976.

CommUnity was founded with the philosophy that a client should determine how they can best be helped, using a process that ensures dignity to all who are served. This philosophy has facilitated CommUnity Crisis Services and Food Bank’s growth as the community we serve has grown in the past 50 years.

A small food pantry was added in 1978 in response to client needs. Clothing and household items became available through vouchers from Goodwill and Crowded Closet in 1981.

Throughout the 1980’s, our staff and volunteers worked to expand our suicide prevention services and began offering support for survivors of a suicide loss. Services were developed to respond to the needs of transients and the homeless.

In the following decade, a collaboration with the local religious community led to distribution of emergency financial support. The Food Bank grew into a weekly operation and began working with Table-to-Table to distribute locally gleaned food.

In recent years, we have added suicide prevention training and crisis incident stress management services.

Our Mission
CommUnity Crisis Services and Food Bank is a volunteer-driven organization that provides immediate and non-judgmental support for individuals facing emotional, food, or financial crisis.

Our Vision
Every individual in our community has support in a time of need.
LEARNING TO RECEIVE AS A PRACTICE OF BALANCE

Jacqui’s Story

Jacqui has been coming to CommUnity since 2012. After moving to the Iowa City area with her husband from Ft. Madison, both of their jobs unexpectedly fell through. Without income, the couple faced an increasingly dire financial situation. “We made it okay for a while and then we just couldn’t make it anymore. I couldn’t make rent and buy food.” Jacqui started a job at Kirkwood helping students with technology and software in the library. She heard about CommUnity, then known as The Crisis Center, from a coworker. Through CommUnity, Jacqui found the help - and hope - that she needed.

Just as they were back then, CommUnity’s Food Bank, housing and utility assistance, and crisis line programs continue to be lifelines for Jacqui’s family. Like many American households caught in circumstances beyond their control, her family has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and unforeseen hardships. Her husband is no longer able to work because of short-term memory loss caused by a car accident. Her oldest daughter, a mother to three young children herself, cannot enter the workforce due to chronic illness. To protect their senior parents and immunocompromised eldest sister, Jacqui’s son and daughter quit their high-risk jobs (convenience store clerk and daycare worker) while taking college courses exclusively online. “At this point, the only income that comes into our two homes is the $72 per month that my daughter gets and whatever I bring in—my retirement, social security, and unemployment. Basically, we’re eight people on a single income.”

Each week, Jacqui picks up her oldest daughter and makes her way to the Food Bank. Their trips have become one of the few opportunities they have to get out of the house and spend time together. “Everyone at the Food Bank has always made me feel welcome, never made me feel bad about being there. Everybody has been so caring, so loving, so giving, and so non-judgmental.” Jacqui deeply appreciates the safety precautions that CommUnity has instituted. “Because of the way CommUnity is handling things and because everyone is wearing masks, we pick up our groceries in person.” She is also thankful that the Food Bank provides items beyond groceries. “You guys have been a salvation. We both have furry friends and you all have helped with cat food and dog food. That’s been really great. There are different kinds of personal need items - shampoo and things like that.”

As someone who regularly performs acts of service for members of her church and community, Jacqui says that one of the most important lessons she’s learned through the years is how to be open to asking for help. “A wise man told me a lot of years ago that service to others is something that as a humanity, we should be doing. But if you give service to others and don’t allow others to serve you, you’re hurting them. You’re not allowing them to grow because of the service that they desire to give. We should be allowing others to serve us so that we can have a balanced experience and we can grow in our lives.”

With the openness to give and receive, Jacqui also exhibits a deep sense of gratitude. “I really appreciate all the people who work at CommUnity and all the volunteers. It’s something that’s really, truly needed.”

LOOKING BACK...
MAKING AN IMPACT

Volunteers are an essential resource at CommUnity. Our volunteers bring their hearts and their hands to work at our food bank. Colleen Schilling has taken the pledge to help and she says it gives her a feeling of satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment. Volunteering is something she has done her entire life, and she says giving back is something she has passed on to her children.

My three kids have helped out at CommUnity over the years and each of them have said to me at different times that they left their shifts with feelings of happiness and satisfaction. I volunteer because my parents took me along to their volunteering and I learned at an early age that helping others just makes us happier and more fulfilled. Who doesn’t want more of that?

HEEDING THE CALL

Crisis Intervention volunteers donate their time, skills and resources to listen, explore feelings, create a safety plan, and offer resources to those who need help. Monty Kehl says that through volunteering, he has learned the value of listening.

Volunteering ‘checks the box’ for what I was hoping to get out of volunteer work during my retirement. But the staff at CommUnity that I work with are terrific folks and for me, they serve as examples for true concern for others. Getting to work with that staff has been a wonderful bonus for my volunteer work.

COLLEEN SCHILLING
Food Bank Volunteer

Monty Kehl
Crisis Intervention Volunteer
LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FUTURE
The Journey to the Food Pantry at Pepperwood Plaza

Maintaining the safety of clients, volunteers and staff has always been a top priority at CommUnity. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, significant adjustments to every program were required to achieve this. Since 2011, CommUnity Food Bank has provided clients with a shopping experience which empowers them to choose the items which are culturally appropriate and useful for them. Launching the "client-choice" model was a significant step towards improving client satisfaction, reducing food waste, and increasing nutrition. Sadly, as COVID-19 reached Iowa in March, it became apparent that a lack of space in the Food Bank would prevent clients from social distancing while shopping. We paused shopping and returned to pre-packaged food bags to keep everyone safe.

As COVID-19 continues to spread in Johnson County, its lingering impact brings new challenges for CommUnity. The rapid approach of winter poses health concerns for clients waiting in the parking lot for their food bags. And, if the economic downturn continues, there is little doubt that there will be an even greater surge in need over the next year. In anticipation of these challenges, we opened a new food pantry location that will allow us to better meet the needs of the community.

CommUnity opened our second food pantry at Pepperwood Plaza on November 9th. The sheer size of the building (roughly twice as big as our current food pantry) allows us to once again provide "client-choice" shopping and an indoor waiting area with social distancing. But social distancing is only one of the many safety precautions we have put in place, such as mandatory mask wearing, hand sanitizing stations, and immediate cleaning of carts after each use. Pepperwood Plaza truly represents our unabating drive to serve all in our community who need assistance. It is our mission in motion.

CommUnity Food Pantry at Pepperwood Plaza
1045 HWY 6 E in Iowa City
builtbycommunity.org/pepperwood

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to the growth of our organization over the last 50 years. Your dedication and generosity has had a profound impact.

We are proud to continue this tradition of leadership in providing support to our neighbors facing food, financial, and emotional crisis.

We look forward to all that we can accomplish together in the next 50 years.
Despite a raging, worldwide pandemic and near historic unemployment, donors still continue to make a difference. It’s no secret that our donors are an essential part of our organization. We appreciate your support in helping us achieve our mission and goals. Thank you for ensuring that our most vulnerable neighbors have somewhere to turn in times of crisis.

Thank you to all of the individual donors who make this year so successful.

We do our best to print names accurately and honor the privacy of those who choose not to be listed. Please contact Julia Erickson at 319-351-2726 ext. 105 with any omissions or errors.

*Denotes a donor who passed away this year.
Beautiful Heroes doing their best in tough times.

Great customer service with friendly smiles. We can say that, too. Iowa City takes care of their own. We have this, that Iowa City takes care of their own.
We care about our neighbors and our community. Cammunity has always done a good job. We feel confident that our donations are used wisely. -Mike & Debbie
Mission Circle members provide sustainability by offering an automated monthly gift that provides stability throughout the ups and downs of the annual giving cycle.
Very polite employees and very helpful in the need. I thank you so very much.
JOIN THE MISSION CIRCLE!

The Mission Circle is a win for everyone. You get to support CommUnity without paperwork, checks, or envelopes. Plus, your contribution creates stability throughout the annual giving cycle.

To learn more and sign up, visit builtbycommunity.org/donate.

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Upcoming Events

February
Spread the Love
March
Pancake Breakfast
April
Shower CommUnity Hunger Banquet
May
Mental Health Awareness Month
June
Strike Out Hunger Fan Club
July
Strike Out Hunger Fan Club
August
Strike Out Hunger
September
Suicide Prevention Month
October
TP CommUnity World Mental Health Day
December
Project Holiday