HUNTINGTON, W.Va. — Hunger is a widespread problem in the Tri-State.

The mission of the Huntington Area Food Bank (HAFB) is to combat the hunger problem in the Tri-State. The HAFB serves 250 agencies in 17 counties in West Virginia, Ohio and Kentucky on a monthly basis, including agencies in Greenup County, Ky.

The Greenup branch of Helping Hands is a nonprofit organization founded in 1996 that provides emergency assistance to low-income individuals in the county. The employees and volunteers at Helping Hands assist 120 to 150 families per month, and the HAFB provides Helping Hands with 3,000 to 8,000 pounds of food per month.

“The food bank supplies a large part of our food that we are able to distribute in Greenup County,” said Helping Hands director Scarlett Grubb. “Last month, we received 7,000 pounds of commodities and only received about 1,200 pounds in donations. We would not be able to serve as many people if we did not get commodities from them.”

Grubb said Helping Hands serves individuals in the 18 to 59 age group the most, followed by children and senior citizens. Helping Hands participates in food drives each fall and spring to collect more food for Greenup County’s residents. The organization has shifted its focus over the past few months to make Helping Hands more of a community center atmosphere, Grubb said.

“Our board members, people in the community, our volunteers and clients are all working together to meet each others’ needs,” Grubb said. “We learn a lot from our clients who come in. We’re trying to promote that any of us could be just one paycheck away from being hungry.”

The Brick Union Lighthouse Church Pantry is another food pantry serving Greenup County, and it has been in operation for two years. Brick Union Lighthouse Church Pantry director Carl Collier said the pantry serves 130 to 150 families per month and receives about 3,000 pounds of food from the HAFB monthly.

“There are a lot of people who are laid off and don’t have a steady income. This really helps them out,” Collier said. “The more we can give out, the more we can help the hungry. And the food bank helps us accomplish that.”

Agencies can receive aid in different ways. For example, agencies may receive United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) commodities through the HAFB, while others directly order regular donated food from the HAFB. Grubb said Helping Hands does not directly order food but will take any type of food the HAFB can provide. Grubb said the organization usually receives canned foods, cereal, beans, juices, and occasionally meat. Collier said the Brick Union Lighthouse Church Pantry places food orders online. For example, the pantry orders boxes filled with varieties of canned goods from Kroger and Wal-Mart.

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Although many may believe that food pantries and soup kitchens are just meant to pass out food to the hungry, Grubb said the process means much more.

“It’s building relationships with people and getting to know people,” Grubb said. “It’s good when you have a success story. We’re trying to work not only with their hunger needs. We’re giving them food because they’re hungry right now, but we’re also trying to help them with employment skills if they need them to get a job so they won’t be hungry anymore. We’re trying to fix the reason why they’re going hungry.

“There is one lady who has re-enrolled in college, and she’s doing well. She’ll come here for the day and just work on her homework and just ask us questions. So, those are good to see.”

Helping Hungry Hearts, a student-run public relations agency from the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Marshall University, is doing its part to help fight hunger. The agency will host the Outrunning Hunger 5K Run/Walk at 9 a.m. April 10 at Pullman Square in Huntington, W.Va.

For more information about Helping Hungry Hearts or to register for the Outrunning Hunger 5K Run/Walk, please visit www.marshall.edu/helpinghungryhearts or e-mail the agency at helpinghungryhearts@marshall.edu. Also contact co-director Whitney Parsley at 304-389-0390. To learn more about the HAFB, please contact Brooke Ash at 304-523-6029 or brooke@hafb.org.

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The Huntington Area Food Bank (HAFB) is a private, nonprofit organization founded in 1983 and based in Huntington, W.Va. The HAFB is affiliated with Feeding America, the country’s largest hunger-relief organization. The HAFB serves more than 250 agencies in 17 counties in West Virginia, southeastern Ohio and northeastern Kentucky. The HAFB’s main mission is to curb the hunger problem in the Tri-State. The HAFB relies on grants, community donations and the United Way to provide food to its agencies. Agencies include food pantries, soup kitchens, emergency shelters, senior citizen programs, youth programs and residential programs. For more information, please visit www.hafb.org.