HUNTINGTON, W.Va. — Having enough food to eat is an aspect of life many take for granted — unless they know what it’s like to go hungry.

The Huntington Area Food Bank (HAFB) serves approximately 91,000 Tri-State residents each month. However, the faltering economy has lessened incoming money and food the HAFB needs to help the hungry.

“Community (or local) food donations were down 500,000 pounds in 2009 compared to 2008,” said Brooke Ash, assistant director of the HAFB. “The trend that we are seeing is that typical food donations are down. The government increased that with the stimulus, but people who are just willing to donate food has decreased.”

Helping Hungry Hearts (HHH), a student-run public relations agency from the W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Marshall University, plans to put a dent in the local hunger problem. The agency hopes to increase community donations by hosting several events this spring.

The agency will host its first annual Outrunning Hunger 5K Run/Walk at 9 a.m. Saturday, April 10, at Pullman Square in downtown Huntington. Registration for the 5K run/walk will begin at 8 a.m. Early registration will cost $15, and registration on the day of race will cost $20.

HHH members also plan to host a click campaign in late February, as well as a second penny drive at Marshall and local elementary and high schools. In November, the Change 4 Change penny drive at three local elementary schools raised almost $900.

“Change 4 Change was a way for our campaign to reach out to the younger generation and allow them to get involved,” said Whitney Parsley, HHH co-director. “Every little bit helps and that is an important lesson for children to learn early in life. Every penny donated will be put to good use. We really had no idea how much we would raise with the penny drive, especially since this is the first year. I never imagined that we would raise nearly $900. The schools really worked hard and exceeded our expectations.”

HHH’s goal is to raise at least $10,000 to help the HAFB further its mission to serve hungry people in 17 counties of West Virginia, southeastern Ohio and eastern Kentucky.

“If they even succeed with half of their goals, then the level of awareness will be raised and people will make some contributions,” said Jon Rickey, HAFB executive director. “And hungry people are going to be fed.”

Hunger is a serious issue, but it is one that can be prevented.

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“I think the only good thing about hunger is that it has a solution,” Ash said. “A lot of problems we are facing today don’t have a solution. I think putting forth to the public that there is a problem and a solution to the problem is the first step in helping to end the hunger issues that we’re seeing in the Tri-State.”

For more information about Helping Hungry Hearts or the Outrunning Hunger 5K Run/Walk, please visit www.marshall.edu/helpinghungryhearts or e-mail the agency at helpinghungryhearts@marshall.edu. Also contact 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 290 agencies in 17 counties in West Virginia, southeastern Ohio and eastern Kentucky. The HAFB’s main mission is to curb the hunger problem in the Tri-State. The HAFB relies on United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) distributions, grants and community donations to send 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.