

Dignity and Compassion

Sherrie Tussler, the recently retired CEO of the Hunger Task Force, spent nearly 30 years changing the national model for addressing food insecurity. **BY TOM DAYKIN**

MILWAUKEE'S HUNGER TASK FORCE might be best known for supplying food to the area's most marginalized people through a network of food pantries, shelters and meal programs.

But Sherrie Tussler, the nonprofit group's recently retired CEO, sees one of her biggest accomplishments as the task force's farm — the source of much of that food.

Before the farm was established in Franklin, Tussler said, the task force “never had any produce. All we had was canned vegetables.” So adding a 208-acre farm to the task force's operations — now a national model for other groups that battle food insecurity — is typical of how Tussler acted during her nearly 30-year tenure at the organization. The venture carried some financial risk — but offered the reward of better serving people who desperately need healthy foods.

Tussler became Hunger Task Force's leader in 1997 after serving as executive director at Hope House, a Milwaukee organization that serves homeless people. She retired from the task force in June 2024.

Along the way, Tussler earned a reputation for building up the organization — the only Milwaukee food bank that doesn't charge for food, delivery or network membership.

She also became known for her vocal advocacy of the people served by the task force.

Tussler says when she first started at Hunger Task Force she “didn't understand how powerful food is.”

“Sometimes now I tell people that food *is* power,” Tussler told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's Sophie Carson in 2024.

“Some people have food, and some people don't, and it literally is an issue of inequity, and people should consider the circumstances under which we all live — in a place where we would allow some people to go without a basic need like food while we ourselves eat very, very well,” she said.

Another example of Tussler's direct approach to solving problems: After growing tired of seeing a fire-damaged house across the street from her Milwaukee home, she bought the dilapidated house for \$1 and secured a \$25,000 city grant — roughly equal to what it would have cost the city to demolish the building.

In return, Tussler restored the house — a project that ended up costing around \$150,000. She then sold it for a bit over that cost — turning a blighted property into a family home.

Tussler, who grew up in Sturtevant, is now living in Racine. She just bought another house in that city and is planning to renovate it with the idea of creating family home to sell for an affordable price.

Those homes and the Hunger Task Force can serve as a legacy — which Tussler hopes is centered on her hard work, honesty and perseverance.

“Those things pay off,” she told the Journal Sentinel. “Compassion for people. The ability to look someone in their eyes and bring a sense of dignity and comfort to them is something we should all do with each other. ‘She worked hard. She did the right thing.’”

