



*The mission of the Food Bank of Lincoln is to alleviate hunger in Southeast Nebraska.*

## **Cooper Foundation key in bringing the Food Bank to Lincoln**

The Food Bank of Lincoln has a special relationship with the Cooper Foundation, going back to the very beginning.

The Food Bank officially opened its doors on August 16, 1982, but its origins began about a year earlier, when Cooper Foundation's program officer Peg Huff visited St. Mary's Food Bank in Phoenix. She came back to Lincoln and suggested this was an idea that could benefit our community.

Cooper Foundation President E.N. "Jack" Thompson was interested. They conducted a survey of food-providing agencies, the number of meals they were providing and how many pounds of food were being distributed. The facts were clear — there was a great need for emergency food in Lincoln. A food bank would benefit those agencies as well as grocery stores and other food donors, and it would get more food to the families that needed it.



*Victoria Grasso, President  
Cooper Foundation*

Jack recruited other leaders — Rich Bailey agreed to chair the new organization, Huff was Vice President and Secretary, and Harry Seward, III was Treasurer. Jack chaired the Funding Committee. Many people were part of that effort, working on legal matters, business management plans, public relations and recruiting volunteers.

In October of 1981, the Cooper Foundation board agreed to provide financial support by hiring Robert Troyer, who had experience with the new Omaha Food Bank, as a consultant to help establish the organization. The Cooper Foundation paid Troyer as a consultant for six months, and he became the Food Bank's first executive director.

"In March of 1982, we made our first official grant to the Food Bank of \$15,000 in start-up funding. Total operating costs for that first year were estimated at about \$65,000," Victoria Grasso, President of the Foundation, explained.

Grasso noted it remains a touchstone for them, an example of how committed people working together on important needs can change the community.

"We still think of the Food Bank as a model for how to engage in transformational philanthropy. Do the research, take risks that can provide significant reward, recognize the power of people and work together," Grasso said.

By 1986, the Food Bank had outgrown its space and had a \$270,000 campaign to build a new 7,000 square-foot facility.

“Cooper provided \$35,000 to that project, but others gave much more, including \$90,000 from Lincoln Community Foundation and \$50,000 from Woods Charitable Fund,” Grasso said. “An important part of our mission, then and now, is to make grants that will encourage others to give, and hopefully give more. As a small foundation, we have to use our resources strategically. In the case of the Food Bank, we were able to apply all our resources—our time, our experience and connections, our endorsement of this new project and grant funding—to help create something that quickly became much larger than we could ever support on our own.”



Over the years the Cooper Foundation has provided grants for many purposes, including the BackPack Program and School Food Markets, support for facilities and equipment, and staffing.

“We don’t take credit for the Food Bank’s work, which truly takes the whole community, but we still think about its formation as a signature accomplishment,” Grasso said. “When we look for opportunities in the community, we ask ourselves, what is the next Food Bank?”