

Charity is a categorical imperative

American House Foundation and the Red Cross

ELISABETH KATALIN GRABOW

People often want to help those in need but simply don't know how. Richard Field, an American businessman, was in the same boat. However, instead of sitting back and doing nothing he set about to make a change, first as a private individual and then, for the last three years, with the American House Foundation (AHF). *The Budapest Times* accompanied him to various institutions operated by the Budapest Chapter of the Hungarian Red Cross.

Filling a gap

It all began at the end of 2009 when Field visited a homeless shelter. "The residents only received bread and dripping for breakfast and dinner," he says. "I had the feeling that they were slowly starving to death." From that point he began delivering bread, cheese, cold-cuts and seasonal fruit and vegetables to them twice weekly. "We wanted to help so we decided to establish a foundation. Since the legal conditions were more favourable in the USA, it was decided that it would have its registered office there, but the aid would go to Hungary with the cooperation of existing non-governmental organisations."

In addition to providing food and other material aid to the poor, American House Foundation seeks to encourage volunteerism and to set an example for other companies doing business in Hungary. "The time is at hand to give something back to Hungary," says Field. "To foreign companies doing business in Hungary, I say if you are not part of the solution you are part of the problem."

Working with Hungarian NGOs

He adds: "The Red Cross has excellent infrastructure and thousands of volunteers countrywide, which is why we chose it as our main partner." It was soon clear that the provision of foodstuffs was the top priority.

Anikó Oroszlán, director of the Red Cross in northern Pest, describes the importance of the American House Foundation: "A lot of families with children and old people with very low pensions live here. Often the money is extremely stretched and the food aid of the foundation is a great relief."

Although the families here have their own four walls, after paying gas and electricity bills they are often left



Reporter Elisabeth Katalin Grabow (third left) interviews Anikó Oroszlán, director of the Red Cross in northern Pest (right) and American House Foundation staff members Gábor and Beáta.



A pensioner receives a food package from District XV volunteer Mrs. Ferenc Szögyényi who had worked at the Red Cross for 32 years, but was laid off last year due to budget cuts.

short of money. The Red Cross distributes 120 packages twice a month to the residents. Around two-thirds of the recipients are families with several children – a fact that is welcomed by Field: "It's bad that people who have often worked all their lives are dependent on this kind of help as pensioners, but it's even worse when children, who can do even less about their situation, have to do without the most essential things, including food."

Often schools or doctors direct families or pensioners to the fortnightly distribution of food by way of a recommendation. Oroszlán explains: "Last year we distributed food packages once a month and took breakfast to schools. Since November we have been distributing packages twice monthly."

This help consists of two kilos of flour, sugar, milk, oil, pasta and lentils or beans. "It's not a lot but it really does help us," says one pensioner.

Providing for 1,000 people daily

From there we head to the Bihari street shelter in District X, one of several day shelters American House Foundation supplies with bread, cold-cuts, green peppers and apples for distribution every morning. "At lunchtime there are fewer people because many are working then or are out and about," says Éva Széplaki, Red Cross director for southern Pest. "It becomes fuller again in the evening."

"Now during the winter crisis period the shelters are bursting at the seams," says Széplaki, "but so far we haven't had to send anybody back onto the street because of overcrowding and nor will we do so... Without the help of the foundation we would only be able to provide one meal a day, since state financing is simply not sufficient for more than that."

American House Foundation also provides a number of Pest schools with weekend food packets for children. "Our financial resources are only just sufficient to run our shelters and to pay our employees," Széplaki says. "Providing extra food packages from our own resources would be unthinkable."

Such help, however, is urgently needed in the poorer districts. The foundation also provides ingredients for breakfast sandwiches to schools in Districts VIII and IX. "Often there is only a lunchroom attendant who would simply not manage to make the delivered donations into sandwiches," Széplaki says. "Luckily we have volunteers who jump in and help. Voluntary help like this and the help provided by American House Foundation make it possible for us to feed some 1,000 Budapest residents daily."

The third stop is a men's shelter in Csepel on the site of the Csepel Works that doubles as a day shelter. The building was purchased and



A worker at the Bihari street day shelter operated by the Red Cross in District X: balcony sandwiches, green peppers and apples are distributed to some 120 individuals daily.

Building a strong foundation

American House Foundation has its registered office in the USA. Although the foundation works in Hungary it does not collect donations here. Instead it is financed primarily with funds provided by the Field family. To date this support amounts to nearly HUF 400 million (EUR 1.41 million). The organisation encourages all companies and private individuals to provide aid and is happy to provide administrative support.

For further information and to ask questions or make suggestions see: www.americanhousefoundation.com www.amerikahazalapitvany.hu



Above: the foundation provides the ingredients for volunteers to make breakfast sandwiches. Here three Red Cross volunteers and Éva Széplaki (right), Red Cross director for southern Pest, prepare breakfast for children at a District IX elementary school. Right: Széplaki addresses a crowd of hopeful food aid recipients at the District IX Red Cross office.



renovated in 2011 with the financial support of the AHF.

A resident describes how things work in the shelter: "We get breakfast with the support of the foundation. The ingredients are delivered to us and made into sandwiches here. Six of us live in a room but there are also two 15-bed rooms."

One of the two dormitories is actually home to 16 residents, one being a cat called Maci (teddy bear), brought by one of the residents from the earlier shelter, who is lovingly cared for.

Not limited to Budapest

American House Foundation also underwrites the cost of distributing milk and bread to 500 needy families with children living in the countryside. According to the Red Cross website (www.voroskereszt.hu) this year 124,000 litres of milk and 248,000 loaves of bread were distributed at a cost to the foundation of HUF 65 million (EUR 230,263). Although the foundation intends to extend the milk and bread program through the end of 2013 the reorganisation of government social services scheduled to take effect on 1 January presents a problem because the food is currently distributed by local government social workers, many of whom stand to lose their jobs at the end of the year.

Helping to help

The achievements of the American House Foundation are no doubt considerable, yet for Field and his three colleagues it is no reason to rest on their laurels. "Often companies that are willing to help are deterred from actually doing so due to lack of transparency," he says. "We are glad to help with both the planning and implementation of projects. What really counts is the desire to help and the knowledge that the aid is actually reaching those in need."