

**CATHY WURZER:** Occasionally, on the program, we like to reach out to local reporters in small towns around Minnesota to find out what is going on in their communities. Laurel Beager is editor of the *Rainy Lake Gazette* in International Falls, which geographically speaking is the northernmost point in Minnesota.

Now, this has been a wet year for the city. We've talked about that in the past. Historic flooding has been seen on Rainy Lake. But Laurel has also been following a quieter. It equally serious story. Hey, Laurel, thanks for coming on *Minnesota Now*.

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Hi, Cathy. How are you?

**CATHY WURZER:** I'm great. Did I get your last name right, Beager?

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Yes.

**CATHY WURZER:** Thank you. In June, I know you reported that there was a hunger crisis in the schools in and around International Falls. And that was as the end of last school year. What information were you getting at the time?

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Well, they were seeing rises in the use of food shelves that are located in each of our schools. They were worried about when the free and reduced lunch as a result of the COVID grants ran out, which is this year, how that would affect student hunger.

**CATHY WURZER:** We talked a few weeks ago to the head of the food shelves at International Falls, Ashley Hall. It was a terrific interview, by the way. And she painted a pretty dire picture, though, of hunger in that part of the state. What's going on in your area that's leading to this problem?

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Well, I think there's just a large wealth and poverty gap in our community. Some of the jobs that we have are much higher paying, but also some of the very lower jobs are going unfilled. I think that there just is a large poverty issue up here. And food insecurity is a high issue because of our location. We're a food desert in many of the areas of our county.

**CATHY WURZER:** Where are the closest grocery stores? Where are they? In International Falls?

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Yeah, we have International Falls and a small town about 20 miles from here, Little Fork. But otherwise, that's about it.

**CATHY WURZER:** My goodness! So getting back to the kids and students who are hungry, the federal government has announced the school meal changes for the current school year. Will those changes be helpful in your community?

**LAUREL BEAGER:** If they're returning the free lunch and breakfasts, that will play a huge role in curbing some of the hunger in our schools.

**CATHY WURZER:** So I know that there have been meetings in your community, looking at solutions that are being investigated. How have those meetings gone?

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Very good. They're still looking at how the need can best be filled in our schools. Right now, I know there's a plan to help with some of the extra after-school curricular activities that go past the supper hour. When buses stop and all the kids don't have enough money to go into the fast food place on their way to a game or on their way home from a game, it can be tough.

I know Ashley's talked about the coaches and advisors every year paying for kids who don't have the money to pay for them. So they're looking at ways that they can address that in the after-school activities.

**CATHY WURZER:** And then anything else that's on the horizon that maybe is for governmental help and that, kind of, thing?

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Well, they're-- right now, they just met with our county board actually to find a new site for the entire food shelf operation that follows hunger coalition's operation, which would make serving clients as well as in taking food much easier and better for everyone.

They're looking at some growing opportunities as far as fresh produce. It's an old armory building that hasn't been used in years for that purpose. And so it would certainly meet a need for the hunger coalition, as well as take a good building and put it to good use.

**CATHY WURZER:** So before you go here, and thank you for outlining this very serious problem in your area, what else are you covering? What other stories are folks talking about?

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Well, our flood recovery is in full gear right now. We had a million sandbags out helping to protect homes and other infrastructure. And that has all been collected and is now being deposited in the right places.

But at the same time, we've just found out that our local residents aren't eligible for assistance. But the small business development center has made low interest loans for some of the private individuals to get some help. So that's a big issue still in our community.

**CATHY WURZER:** And that is a huge issue because don't you have-- the folks who've been really affected by the flooding, they're maybe a little bit older and an older demographic that maybe needs that help.

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Yeah. That was-- it's tough. People want to stay in their homes no matter where they are for as long as they can. And so the aging population here did suffer. And so we're hoping that some of the small or low interest loans will help people rebuild.

**CATHY WURZER:** Laurel, thank you so much. I appreciate your time.

**LAUREL BEAGER:** Thank you, and thanks for reaching out. We appreciate it.

**CATHY WURZER:** Absolutely. Laurel Beager is the editor of the *Rainy Lake Gazette* in International Falls. You can read about this story and others at the *Rainy Lake Gazette's* website. That's [rainylakegazette.com](http://rainylakegazette.com).

And oh, by the way, I always appreciate hearing from listeners. And I give tons of credit to John Dahl who says, hey, quick note, International Falls is on the Canadian border, but it's not the most northern part of the state. That is true. I'm so sorry, John. You are correct.

The Northwest Angle is the most northern point in the state of Minnesota. John's from Northwestern, Minnesota. So he says he feels responsible, so that's why he sent a note. I appreciate that, John, who is now in St. Paul. Thanks for listening.