Hunger in a land of plenty

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In a country considered to be the fattest in the world, it seems oxymoronic that the US is also the only industrialized nation that still has widespread poverty. In the US, calories are cheap but nutrition is expensive. In a country with a safety-net full of holes, poor people (mostly children) suffer from hunger when there is food aplenty growing in the fields, packing the shelves of gargantuan grocery stores (unless you are one of the millions of unlucky poor who have limited access to a grocery store) and restaurant servings on the verge of nauseating.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), in 2005, approximately 35.1 million people — including 12.4 million children — lived in households that experience hunger or the risk of hunger each year. This represents 11 percent of households in the United States. Interestingly, the USDA does not have a measure of "hunger" or the number of hungry people. However, it defines households with very low food security as "food insecure with hunger" and characterized them as households in which one or more people experienced hunger because they could not afford food.

In Washington State, there has been progress on the hunger front. We have gone from being the second-hungriest state in the nation to being the thirty-ninth — in only seven years. To get us to the bottom of that list, Children’s Alliance has launched a two-year project called End Childhood Hunger in Washington with a goal of making sure that children throughout the state get three nutritious meals per day.

Left behind

It takes no research for us to know that children who experience severe hunger have higher levels of chronic illness, anxiety and depression, and behavior problems than children with no hunger. And how can they learn when their only meal may be the free lunch they receive at school? Not surprisingly, low test scores and participating in the free lunch program are highly linked; poor children are "left behind." Ninety percent of households receiving food stamps live below the poverty line ($20,650 for a family of four in 2007).

Feeding the hungry

To address the dozens of millions of hungry people in the US, the USDA oversees more than twenty nutrition assistance programs. The two major nutrition assistance programs of the USDA are Food Stamps and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). The details of these programs cannot be discussed here, but access is a big issue because almost 50 percent of people who qualify for the Food Stamp program do not receive benefits. Stigma, lack of information and administrative hassles are a huge barrier to getting services, especially if the situation is expected to be short-term.

In 2006, the USDA reports that the Food Stamp program spent nearly $33 billion to assist almost 27 million people with an average monthly benefit per person of $94.32! Can you plan a food budget that gives you less than $25 to spend on food each week?

In 2006, the WIC program spent more than $5 billion to provide food, nutrition education and referrals to more than eight million low-income (185% of poverty income guidelines) pregnant, parenting and breast-feeding women, infants and children younger than 5 years old. The WIC program provides items like infant formula and cereals, eggs, milk, cheese, peanut butter, dried beans/peas, tuna fish and, according to their Web site, only one vegetable: carrots.

CARROTS?! Why carrots? Well, the USDA develops list of available food products in their food programs based on agricultural surplus, not on basic food needs. This serves large farmers and shuts out the smaller farmer who may sell directly through farmers’ markets, which for the most part accept the limited dollars permitted to be used in these settings. But things may be shifting as acting agriculture secretary Chuck Conner announced on Oct. 1 almost $1 million in grants to promote farmers’ markets in 16 states, and $5 million to increase access to food stamps.
Despite all these programs, in 2006, the US Conference of Mayors reported that 45 percent of the cities surveyed did not have enough food to give to those in need and America's Second Harvest, the largest network of food banks in the country, served an estimated 25 million people.

How do we solve the hunger problem?

First and most importantly, pay people a living wage so they need not choose between a nutritious meal and the rent. Second, increase access by poor people to fresh fruit and vegetables. Third, increase access to nutrition assistance programs by providing transportation and raising income guidelines. Fourth, increase access to summer nutrition programs to poor children. Last, increase the amount of assistance given since the average support is $1.03 per meal: a fiscal and nutritional challenge.

What can you do?

1. Write, call or visit your legislators (see www.leg.wa.gov to find your legislators and their contact info) in support of a) expanding the use of food stamps in farmers' markets; b) increasing access to nutrition programs by raising income qualification standards; c) increasing access to summer nutrition programs for children; and d) raising the amount of nutrition assistance that people receive.

2. Join with organizations that fight hunger and fight for "living wages." (See below).

For more information, visit:
WIC info: www.fns.usda.gov/wic
Food stamps info: www.fns.usda.gov/fsp
Advocacy: www.childrensalliance.org
Advocacy: www.livingwagecampaign.org
Advocacy: www.bread.org
Advocacy: www.oxfam.org

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