

Yamada Takes on Hunger Challenge

Assemblywoman pledges to live on meager budget

By Sarah Rohrs / Times-Herald

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Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada, D-Davis, got home about 10 p.m. Wednesday hungry after a long day of work and reached for the only thing left she could "afford" that day - a package of Ramen noodles.

So ended the third day of her five-day "Hunger Challenge" in which she has pledged to spend \$1.48 per meal or \$4.33 per day on food - the average amount food stamp recipients receive.

The challenge, her fourth annual pledge, is meant to serve as a reminder that hunger is "a daily reality" for millions of Americans in a rich country and state, Yamada said.

"There's nothing more basic than a meal and on \$1.48 per meal that's not much," Yamada said by phone Wednesday.

"The challenge is that you have some food available but you are never really full. It's important to feel that same hunger that so many Californians face every day of which most of children and seniors," she added.

In Solano and Contra Costa counties, nearly one in six people struggle with hunger and are unsure where their next meals will come from, Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano spokeswoman Lisa Sherrill said.

Some 132,000 residents in both counties - including 40,000 in Solano - rely on the food bank to feed themselves and their families, Sherrill said. That number represents a 35 percent increase over the last two years, Sherrill said.

The \$21.34 Yamada spent for her five-day challenge got her 13 items, including ground turkey, tofu, a can of soup, one can of black beans, one can of tuna, a six-pack of Ramen noodles, one head of lettuce, three bananas, two tomatoes, one package of green beans, four containers of yogurt, a loaf of bread and a can of coffee on sale.

This week she said she's refused meals during various functions and state meetings which has sparked conversations about her challenge and hunger in the California.

According to "The Hunger in America 2010" study, 6 million Californians do not know the source of their next meals.

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or the food stamp program, helps feed more than two million low-income Californians, of which more than half are children and nearly 8 percent are seniors, according Yamada's office.

The food stamp program was recently renamed CalFresh and while record numbers of Californians have signed up for assistance in the recession in recent years, services are still underutilized, Yamada said.

In the continuing state budget crisis, Yamada said the federal food stamp allotment will not be cut, but funding for state departments administering the services may be.

"We don't want to see reductions in services especially when benefits are 100 percent federally-funded," she said.

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