

Locals struggle to feed families

By Rachel Raskin-Zrihen/ Times-Herald, Vallejo

Posted: 07/11/2012 01:04:11 AM PDT

Tens of thousands of locals are struggling to feed their families, a new study reveals, and a local food bank official said it shows the United States may be headed toward Third World status.

"It's certainly not an indication it's being resolved," Larry Sly, Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano executive director, said Tuesday.

A new study by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research found some 34,000 Solano County adults and about 13,000 Napa County adults could not afford to put adequate food on the table during the recent recession.

Contra Costa resident Marla Williams said she lost her corporate job in 2008, after her husband got out of the Army. Ever since then, the two of them have each earned about \$9 an hour as they struggle to feed their two daughters.

The Food Bank helps bridge the gap between the end of the money and the end of the month, she said.

"It costs about \$250 at Winco to completely fill the pantry, but we haven't been able to do that for years, now," Williams said. The family lost its apartment when Williams' husband's employer cut his hours, and they now live "with a very nice lady," as they both work to improve their lot, she said.

It's a common story these days. Statewide, nearly 4 million California adults -- particularly those in households with children and low-income Latinos -- experienced food insecurity, the study shows.

The findings don't surprise Sly, he said.

"Our studies show that one in six children are in danger of hunger in our area," Sly said. "(The findings are) completely reasonable. They very much coordinate with the numbers of people we see."

Sly said the number of those seeking food bank help has increased some 40 percent since 2008, and shows no sign of receding, despite the recession being officially over.

"To be positive, it seems to be leveling out, but it's showing no signs of dropping," he said.

"What we've seen, no great surprise, is people who can't find work, many who have never been in this situation before. Some, anecdotally, went from six figures to nowhere near that, piecing together several lower paying jobs. And they're coming to us to get some food help."

The study found that in 2009, about one in six low-income Californians had "very low food security," meaning they had to eat less and experienced hunger -- double what it was in 2001.

Food insecurity jumped during the "Great Recession" of 2007-09, when California's unemployment rate increased from 5 percent to 11 percent, according to the study.

"In addition, inflation-adjusted median household income decreased by nearly 5 percent from 2009 to 2010, the largest decline on record," it notes.

"With the economy still in a slump, many families are grappling with difficult choices: 'Do I pay the bills or buy food to feed my children?' " said study co-author Gail Harrison, a professor at UCLA's Fielding School of Public Health.

Sly said many of his clients face the same dilemma.

"The numbers are increasing in all the lower income areas, and especially in families with children," he said. "Often people are OK with skipping a meal themselves, but aren't willing to let their children be in that situation."

In his 36 years with the food bank, Sly said "this is without a doubt the worst situation I've ever seen. The difference between those who are getting by and those who aren't is way more dramatic than it's ever been."

Sly said there appears to be no relief in sight.

"I hear good statistics but the impact on us isn't obvious. The number of people we're seeing is the same as a year ago," he said. "People need to realize as a society we have an issue here -- that the number of people in difficult circumstances is quite significant. The gap between rich and poor is widening. It's pretty scary. There used to be a significant middle class in the U.S. and it's slowly going away."

In June, the Senate passed its version of the Farm Bill with \$4.5 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as Food Stamps) benefits, study authors and Sly noted. Both said the timing couldn't be worse.

"Congress can help families avoid food insecurity by maintaining an adequate and resilient safety net," said Matthew Sharp of the California Food Policy Advocates, which funded the study. The study's authors recommend increased efforts to enroll low-income Californians in plans like free school breakfast and lunch programs. And Sly says people can help by supporting food banks, but that there's a larger picture to consider.

"We need to make sure the needs of hungry people are included in national and state budget discussions," Sly said. "We need to decide where we want to be as a society and I think feeding hungry children should be first on the list."