

Larry Sly: Study pinpoints areas of food insecurity

By Larry Sly

POSTED: 05/12/2014 07:00:53 PM PDT

Feeding America, the national food bank network, recently released findings about the "missing meals" in each county in the United States. The Map the Meal Gap project was created, to learn more about the face of hunger at the local level.

We now see that 1 in 7 people in the area are food insecure and that includes nearly 22,000 children in Solano County. The U.S. Department of Agriculture tells us that 49 million people are in danger of hunger nationally. But as I considered those numbers, I was shocked when I saw that 1 in 5 children are in danger of hunger.

Hunger is a pervasive and solvable problem throughout the country. Studies like Map the Meal Gap 2014 (Meal Gap) allow Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano to continue to evaluate and adjust to the need in our area. With the extensive and revealing data it has provided, we will be armed with the information needed to work toward making sure everyone has enough to eat.

The research data includes weekly food-budget shortfalls, demographics and poverty levels which help us determine the social issues in our area and work together as a community to find a solution.

The Meal Gap and USDA numbers say the same thing in many different ways: It is not acceptable for a country as rich as the United States to have children who do not get the food they need. Even one child going hungry is not OK. It does not make sense that hunger should be accepted by us, no matter the number.

Lori puts a face to those numbers. She is a food assistance participant in Fairfield. She describes her life before 3 years ago as having been "always married with children" and never having to worry about food or that type of thing. Three years ago she went through a very difficult divorce and found herself in financial trouble and needing to take care of her 2 children (now 12 and 14).

A nurse, she worked at the Public Authority with the elderly doing in-home support services, but she has been off work from there since August on disability — which means money is very tight.

The healthy vegetables, rice, cereal, apples, sweet potatoes and other staples she gets from the Food Bank are a huge nutritious boost to her and her children — and it means she can actually afford to buy meat on occasion. Simply being able to get milk (now quite expensive) is a huge relief.

Lori stresses that she appreciates every bit of the help she gets, and she feels it is teaching her kids how to share, be humble, conquer their fears and not be afraid to ask for help. She says their faces light up on days she picks up food, they are so excited to get the healthy yogurts, fruits and veggies she is able to bring home.

Lori hopes that people will see that there is little truth to the stereotypes about people taking advantage to the system. She hopes they will see that those who get food, are like you and me, just in need of some help.

I am proud that the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano can help our neighbors like Lori. We will distribute nearly 21 million pounds of food to our neighbors in need this fiscal year, and nearly half that food will be fresh produce.

We recognize however that we are one part of the answer. Nutrition programs like CalFresh, school lunch and senior citizen feeding programs demonstrate that as a country know how to extend a helping hand when our neighbors need food. When we see that food is needed, people motivate our response, not numbers.

If you would like to learn more, a summary of the findings, an interactive map of the United States, and the full report are available at www.feedingamerica.org/mapthegap.

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