

Richmond Confidential



Food benefits for Richmond's hungry remain underused

Ashley Njoroge on September 19, 2019

About 16,900 Richmond residents live below the poverty line. That's 15.7% of the city's population, more than the national average of 13.4% cited by the U.S. Census Bureau, suggesting the city has more than its share of families who are food insecure. Yet food benefits are going unused by eligible people in the current political climate.

"One in every 8 people turn to the Food Bank for emergency and supplemental food each month," says Kim Castaneda, the development director of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.

But even more, hungry families may do without help for fear that accepting aid may jeopardize their residency status. "A major reason is the looming 'public charge rule' that could allow federal government to deny green cards to immigrants using forms of public assistance," says Castaneda. The rule must survive legal challenges from California and other states if it is to take effect in mid-October 2019.

September is Hunger Action Month, when people all over America stand together with Feeding America and the nationwide network of food banks to fight hunger. Feeding America is the largest hunger-relief organization in the US, working with 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries and food programs to provide meals to more than 46 million people each year.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), defines food insecurity as the lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members and limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods. Food insecurity may reflect a household's need to make trade-offs between important basic needs. While no family should be forced to decide whether to buy groceries or pay rent, or any senior to choose between food and proper healthcare, many families make this demoralizing decision to survive.

While unemployment and the high costs of living have principally contributed to food insecurity, underemployment sometimes leads to strained food budgets in homes. Sometimes, changes in regular situations in families, such as unanticipated car maintenances or calamities such as the Paradise Camp Fires are enough to plunge families into food insecurity.

A report by the 2019 USDA reveals that at some point during the year; 98% of households with low food security were worried they would run out of food before they got money to buy more, 95.9% couldn't afford to eat balanced meals, 31.7% adults and 2.3% of kids did not eat for a whole day. Some respondents reported eating less than they felt they should, with adults cutting meal sizes or skipping meals for them to feed their children. Reliance on low cost foods to feed children by poor families may counterintuitively increase the prevalence of overweight and obesity-related disorders.

Since federal nutrition programs don't reach everyone in need, food banks help bridge the gap. The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano sources food in different ways. It solicits donations of packaged, perishable and nonperishable food from manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, brokers, food drives, gardens and individuals. It also receives fresh produce from the produce industry in a partnership with the California Association of Food Banks. Government-funded sources and wholesale food purchasing are the other main methods. Available food is then distributed to families and individuals in need through agencies.

Food in Richmond is mainly distributed to qualifying low-income families or individuals under four programs. The Community Produce Program, where individuals receive between 15-20 pounds of free fresh produce twice monthly, the Food Assistance Program where free groceries are distributed once a month, the Food for Children program which gives boxes of free healthy food every month for children aged 4-6 years and the Senior Food Program which donates free groceries twice a month to individuals aged 55 or older. Readers can visit the Food Bank's website to ascertain their eligibility.

Despite the resolute efforts by different bodies to provide food security, Contra Costa County has a history of extreme under-enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, (SNAP), known as CalFresh in California. In 2015, a grand jury reported to the County Board of Supervisors that the county failed to receive as much as \$54 million in federal funds because only 67,999 of the eligible 116,074 residents took advantage of CalFresh benefits in 2012. The latest national report on SNAP participation rates showed the under-enrollment, revealing that only about 72% of eligible Californians actually used SNAP benefits in 2016.

As early as last year, when rumors about the impending rule first circulated, low-income immigrant families declined to apply for food assistance when approached by the Food Bank's SNAP outreach workers. Similarly, many parents considered disenrolling their children from a range of public benefits. Staff from the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano heard from naturalized U.S. citizens – who would be unlikely to be targeted by the policy – asking to terminate SNAP benefits for themselves and their citizen children out of fear that it may affect their immigration status, according to observations made in a blog post by Larry Sly, executive director at the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano Counties.

“People are scared to get food because they'll be identified as undocumented,” Castaneda said.