

Yoloans are going hungry

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy | Enterprise staff writer | October 29, 2010 09:39



Volunteers Julia Robinson, left, and Corryn Hamakawa organize donations of canned goods Saturday morning at the Food Bank of Yolo County in Woodland. Demand for food assistance has soared, a spokesman said. Wayne Tilcock/Enterprise photo

When the federal government reported last year that the number of Americans living without consistent access to adequate food had soared to the highest levels since the government began tracking those numbers, it was no surprise to those who fight hunger locally.

More people than ever were seeking assistance from local agencies ranging from the Short-Term Emergency Aid Committee here in Davis to the Food Bank of Yolo County, located in Woodland.

'Demand has gone through the roof,' Jose Martinez, Food Bank executive director, confirmed this week.

But even while the need has soared and local organizations have done their best to keep pace, federally funded programs that would

go a long way toward curbing chronic hunger remain underutilized, particularly in Yolo County.

In fact, less than a third of people eligible for food stamps in Yolo County receive them, according to California Food Policy Advocates, which tracks nutrition and hunger in the state.

CFPA reports that of the 33,958 people in Yolo County with incomes low enough to make them eligible for the food stamp program, just 10,606 people participated last year. Only eight California counties had lower participation rates.

The term 'food stamps' is actually a misnomer, as paper coupons were replaced years ago with cards that look and function like any debit card. Recent changes to the program in California, including renaming the food stamp program 'CalFresh,' as well as new ways to apply and new rules to improve access, are all aimed at increasing participation, CFPA reports.

And improving participation would not just go a long way toward feeding the hungry, but also would do some good for the local economy, Martinez said.

The federal government pays for the benefits, as well as half the cost of administering the program, while the state and counties cover the rest. Federal officials estimate that every \$1 in benefits generates as much as \$1.84 in economic activity by increasing business for grocery stores, farms, transportation companies and other firms.

CFPA estimates if everyone eligible for food stamps in Yolo County participated, it would generate an additional \$44.2 million in economic activity for the region.

'The county is losing out on money,' Martinez said, 'both in terms of benefits and in people buying food in the community.'

The Food Bank recently received a grant from the California Association of Food Banks to hire someone solely for food stamp outreach. That person, who Martinez said will start on Monday, will visit agencies and community events and spread the word on food stamp availability and how to qualify.

STEAC, too, plans to help with food stamp access.

Executive director Susan Simon said STEAC has been looking into the process and plans to have a program set up after Jan. 1 to help people enter the program.

'People are just afraid of the process and don't know what to do,' Simon said, 'so we will have people helping with that.'

School breakfasts

Food stamps aren't the only area where Yolo County participation in federal food programs lags.

The county also does poorly when it comes to the federally funded school breakfast program, with just 33 percent of eligible children participating, putting Yolo County in the bottom five counties in the state, CFPA reported.

The county does better with school lunch participation: 77 percent of income-eligible children participate.

Experts say those federal food programs are a key weapon in the battle against hunger, and while folks in Yolo County are not taking full advantage of them, they do seem to be making the most of local nonprofits that provide food directly.

The Food Bank of Yolo County, for one, saw demand skyrocket three years ago and only recently has it seemed to be leveling off, Martinez said.

The Food Bank serves as a clearinghouse of sorts, collecting and storing food donations from growers, manufacturers, distributors and grocery stores, which it then provides to some 70 nonprofits that serve more than 20,000 people in Yolo County every month.

The Food Bank also provides direct food delivery through several programs, and it's there that Martinez has seen the increase in hunger first-hand.

Friday's Table

He cites as example the 'Friday's Table' program, started a number of years ago as way to give away perishable food that would not have lasted over the weekend. People could stop by the Food Bank in Woodland to pick up provisions every Friday morning.

For years, Martinez said, about 100 people would show up. Then, around 2007, that number shot up to 300 people, and demand just continued to grow.

Now the Friday's Table program has expanded to four other sites, including the Davis Korean

Church on Friday afternoons, and the whole program now serves more than 1,000 people every week.

'And that is only representative of one small program that we have,' Martinez said. 'The demand is up everywhere.'

The face of those in need is changing too, he said.

'We used to serve primarily seniors,' he said. 'Now we're seeing a lot more people in their 20s and 30s and 40s, and we're seeing people that we didn't see five years ago in food lines. The face of hunger has changed. It really has over the past three years. People on that line have never dreamed they would be on that line.'

More families

Simon is seeing the same over at STEAC.

'We have more families than ever,' she said. 'And it's often people that are just totally embarrassed by the whole thing.'

While poverty remains a strong gauge of what the federal government calls 'food insecurity,' hunger is actually measured through the use of surveys, the most recent of which found about 15 percent of Americans - including 16 million children - living with food insecurity in 2008, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

That meant they struggled to put adequate food on the table, and only did so with the help of food stamps, food banks and soup kitchens.

A similar study by UCLA found 2.5 million adults in California struggled to put adequate food on the table for their families. In Yolo County, the Food Bank estimates that number at around 30,000 people, close to the same number as those eligible for food stamps.

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