

Food insecurity: A disgraceful reality

Written by Clarence Hightower
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After witnessing the national media coverage of the Chicago Public Schools teachers' strike of 2012, one distinct and disturbing image still haunts me.

I clearly remember many parents asking; in fact begging city officials to keep the schools open, as it was the only way to ensure their children received a hot, healthy meal. Of course, the issue of school lunches has been a hot topic locally as we have learned that in several instances Minnesota school children, including those eligible for reduced-priced lunches, were being denied a hot lunch if their account had insufficient funds. This story caused an uproar among parents, politicians and advocacy groups forcing several school administrators to explain such policies. Just this past week, Sen. Al Franken proposed that the federal government step in to cover the full cost for students eligible for reduced-priced lunch.

However, when considering both the situation in Chicago and Minnesota's school lunch dilemma, I contend that the crisis is much deeper and relates to the larger issue of food insecurity. Food insecurity, which is defined as limited or uncertain access to nutritious, affordable food, has increased significantly in America during the past decade. Many low-income families suffering from food insecurity don't often know where their next meals will come from. Some families make the tactical decision to skip meals in order to stretch their budgets. Food shelves do help and food shelf usage in Minnesota alone has nearly doubled in the past two decades. Still, they only provide limited and temporary assistance to low-income households.

Around the same time of the Chicago Public Schools strike; University of Minnesota researchers published a study in the American Journal of Public Health that revealed nearly 40 percent of Twin Cities households had experienced food insecurity during the previous 12 months. A follow-up story posted by the nonprofit online news service MinnPost noted that this figure, "is almost four times higher than previously believed and more than two-and-a-half times the national average."

There have been a number of strategies both locally and nationally to address this emergency, including outreach initiatives designed to help eligible households secure benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program. In 2009, the New York Times utilized data from state agencies, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Census Bureau, to develop an interactive web map illustrating food stamp usage across every county in America. In Ramsey County for example, it was determined that only 60 percent of eligible households were receiving SNAP benefits. During the past few years, a partnership between the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Greater Twin Cities United Way, and local community action agencies helped to significantly increase the number of households receiving SNAP, including thousands more in Ramsey County alone.

Notwithstanding such efforts to fight hunger and food insecurity, Congress passed a new farm bill in February that will reduce SNAP benefits. In response to Congress, the Center on Budget Policy and Priorities stated that this farm bill, "will mean a benefit cut for nearly all of the nearly 48 million SNAP recipients – 87 percent of whom live in households with children, seniors, or people with disabilities." In Minnesota, more than 550,000 will be directly affected including

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239,000 children and 114,000 who are elderly and/or disabled. Three states – New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania – have boldly announced plans to mitigate SNAP cuts to their eligible residents, and other states could still follow. Still, the outlook is bleak for far too many of our fellow citizens

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "a budget is a moral document." It is a reflection our society's core values and allows history to judge how we have and continue to treat one another. I find it unconscionable that today, in 2014, we can still tolerate a young, or for that matter any of citizens, having to go to bed hungry.



Clarence Hightower is the executive director of Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties, part of a national network of more than 1,000 organizations and the largest community action agency in Minnesota.