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Viewpoints: Let's make sure food aid reaches the hungry

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The cornucopia is a symbol of food and abundance dating back to the 5th century B.C. It is also referred to as the harvest cone and the horn of plenty, and commonly associated with Thanksgiving. The original depictions were of a goat's horn filled with fruits and flowers.

But, for the more than 250,000 people in Sacramento County who qualify for food stamps, now called CalFresh, the Thanksgiving cornucopia is really a horn of hunger.

This reflects a national trend, recently highlighted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's November report on food security, which said that 17.4 million people have trouble putting food on the table because of lack of resources.

To compound this hunger crisis, the USDA consistently ranks California among the states with the very worst participation in federal nutrition assistance. Less than half of all Californians who are eligible for CalFresh actually participate, due to the barriers they face in accessing the program, including lack of transportation and child care. Fortunately, Sacramento County performs far above the statewide average, with three-quarters of those eligible participating in the programs. Yet, this means that more than 50,000 people who qualify do not receive the benefits of this nutrition program.

The cost in lost federal benefits and the associated loss of economic activity caused by the underutilization of CalFresh is staggering. California Food Policy Advocates estimates that Sacramento County loses \$57 million annually in lost federal CalFresh dollars due to under-enrollment. Every benefit dollar generates \$1.84 in economic activity. Thus, Sacramento County is losing \$103 million in associated economic activity. As individuals, families, businesses and public agencies are facing financial deficits, it is disgraceful, especially during this holiday season, to leave tens of millions of federal dollars on the table.

Especially affected by the lack of access to food are the estimated 5,000 homeless people in Sacramento County. The Sacramento Hunger Coalition recently released a report, "Hunger & Homelessness in Sacramento: 2010," based on a survey of 110 homeless people. Key findings included: 53 percent currently do not receive CalFresh and 65 percent of respondents receiving CalFresh report the benefit lasted only two to three weeks per month; access to free food is limited, with even the most common source, "sidewalk giveaways," being utilized by only half

of respondents; and 16 percent of homeless people experience discrimination, harassment and intimidation in accessing restaurants and stores in order to eat.

Additionally, more than 20 percent stated they cannot use their CalFresh EBT cards at local farmers markets. Only a handful of Sacramento farmers markets, and only 20 percent in the state, accept CalFresh EBT cards, despite the availability of free equipment from the state. This results in more than 200,000 people, including tens of thousands of children, missing the opportunity to eat fresh and nutritious foods grown by our local farmers.

As you sit down to your next holiday meal, we wish your home's cornucopia is overflowing with fruits and flowers. For those who are hungry and destitute, we wish them a horn filled with political will that our local leaders will require Sacramento's full engagement in the CalFresh program as part of a larger effort to end and prevent homelessness in our community.

We need a table – a four-legged approach for Sacramento to be a cutting edge, sustainable community: affordable housing, transportation, employment and access to nutritious food. Any approach that falls short leaves homeless and low-income people hungering for more.

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