

Viewpoints: Eliminate food insecurity for millions in California

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Four million people. That's a little more than the entire population of the state of Oregon. It is also the number of low-income adults who struggle to put food on the table in California.

According to a new analysis of data from the California Health Interview Survey released by the California Food Policy Advocates, 4.1 million adults in the state are considered "food insecure" as they lack consistent access to an adequate diet.

Not being consistently able to afford enough food has consequences, like having to make difficult choices between eating and paying for prescription medications, or between eating and paying the electricity bill.

And often, despite the best efforts of these adults, food insecurity can have consequences for children. Parents may have few options other than to feed their children the cheapest calories they can find, calories that are often rich in fat and poor in nutrition.

So what can be done? With a stronger recovery from the recession, we should expect fewer households to struggle. But until there are adequate jobs to allow households to be able to afford health care, housing and other basic needs without putting the squeeze on food, then we as a state are going to need a strong nutrition safety net.

Four million people. That, coincidentally, is the approximate number of low-income people eligible but not participating in CalFresh, the state's best defense against food insecurity. Low CalFresh participation not only means we are leaving \$4.7 billion in needed food assistance off the tables of struggling households, it also means we are losing out on \$8.3 billion in much-needed economic activity in the wake of the recession.

Another underutilized tool is the School Breakfast Program. Despite the powerful impact of breakfast on student achievement and on food insecurity, too many low-income children miss out on breakfast. Only 30 percent of low-income students eat breakfast at school.

Four million people struggling to put food on the table in California. That seems like a daunting number. But we needn't feel hopeless to the task.

The first beacon of hope is that we, as a country, virtually eliminated hunger in the 1970s. Thanks to strong public policies, our country had a secure safety net. Such policy action is possible again.

A second beacon of hope is that in this modern age, a number like 4 million isn't as large and daunting as it once was. For example, in 2011, more than 4 million people got the Apple iPhone 4S within just three days of its release. The reach of commerce and technology is astounding; so too can be the reach of health and wellness.

Millions of people will come through Covered California, our state health exchange, in search of health care. Shouldn't we be enrolling low-income households in nutrition programs at the same time we enroll them in health care? Yes.

And in this academic year, more than 6 million students will attend public school in California. Doesn't it make sense to seize this opportunity to serve more low-income students breakfast at school? On behalf of the 70 percent of low-income students who don't eat breakfast at school, we say "yes."

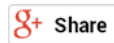
One final beacon of hope may be this: In this new age of technology and social media, it only takes a few people to start spreading the word of the problems of food insecurity faced by millions of Californians. And with all of the tools at our disposal today that were not available in the 1970s, we can once again achieve the virtual elimination of hunger.

Dr. Hilary Seligman is a physician at San Francisco General Hospital and Trauma Center and an assistant professor at the University of California, San Francisco's Center for Vulnerable Populations. George Manalo-LeClair is the executive director of the California Food Policy Advocates.

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