

Pay bills or buy food?

Written by Jeff Mitchell

Mar. 22, 2014 3:12 AM |

thecalifornian.com

Pay bills or buy food?

Stigma associated with food insecurity often hard to overcome



Marriage and family therapist Mary Sue Abernethy outside her office in Monterey. Abernethy's professional emphasis is on the treatment of anxiety, depression, eating disorders and trauma (PTSD.)

Next up

Food insecurity in the Salinas Valley presents a conundrum of epic proportions for many low-income residents. Experts say it's not unlike being lost at sea where you have water all around you but not a drop to drink. We will look at what the area's \$4 billion a year agricultural industry is doing to lessen hunger among its workers and what local government and the private sector are doing to lessen the scourge as well.

Recalling her time as a single teen mother living in Austin, Mary Sue Abernethy described the anguish of not being able to fully provide for herself or her child.

Just keeping a roof overhead often tapped what little funds she had and frequently left the 17-year-old mother and her child without enough money for food.

Abernethy said she had to depend on neighbors and strangers to get through that time, causing her shame and a sense of failure.

"There were times when I had to beg in order to make it to the end of the week," Abernethy said. "I think having to go through that changes a person. It can crush your spirit or, as in my case, it can ultimately motivate you."

Nowadays, Abernethy is a well established marriage, family and nutritional therapist in Monterey. She may be financially comfortable now, but she says she'll never forget those days of struggle.

"I think sometimes people are afraid to ask for help because they're afraid of what they'll see in the eyes of the person they're asking," she said.

Abernethy said having inadequate funds for food can also mean making poor nutritional choices, such as going to a fast-food restaurant with "meal deals" to make food dollars stretch.

And while bellies may get filled temporarily, the resulting intake of high levels of fat, sugar and salt found in such foods often brings on incidents of child obesity and other serious medical conditions.

Despite its wealth, palatial beachside residences and championship golf courses, Monterey County ironically rates at the top of California's 58 counties in terms of "food insecurity," according to California

Food Policy Advocates, a nonprofit public interest research group.

Food insecurity, according to experts, is defined as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”

Monterey County is not alone. Despite the U.S. still being the richest and most food-abundant nation in the world, food insecurity is a problem everywhere, experts say.