

INTRODUCTION

The federal government currently provides nutrition assistance to income-eligible children and their families through U.S. Department of Agriculture programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the Food Stamp Program), the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and several commodity assistance programs.

In Fiscal Year 2008, USDA spent \$60.7 billion on food assistance programs, an 11 percent increase over the previous year. This represented the largest percentage increase in food assistance spending in 16 years and the eighth consecutive year in which food assistance expenditures exceeded the previous historical record amount.

Clearly, the need continues to dwarf the response: Despite USDA spending and that of countless other public and private agencies and organizations of all sizes across the nation, childhood hunger in America continues at an unacceptable level. In 2007, the most recent year for which data are available, USDA reported that 16.9 percent of all children (12.4 million) had low or very low food security; nearly one percent of all children (691,000) had very low food security. In the same year, 15.8 percent of households with children (6.2 million) had low or very low food security; 0.8 percent of households (323,000) had very low food security. In African American and Hispanic households, rates of food insecurity were higher.

Results of a long-term study of 4,800 households published in the November issue of the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* found that 90 percent of African American children (and about 49 percent of all children) will, by 20 years of age, reside in a household that receives food stamps. The study's conclusion, in summary: "American children are at a high risk of encountering a spell during which their families are in poverty and food insecure as indicated through their use of food stamps. Such events have the potential to seriously jeopardize a child's overall health."

By USDA definition, individuals experiencing low food security can avoid disrupting their eating patterns by using a variety of coping strategies such as eating less varied diets, participating in federal food assistance programs, or getting emergency food from community pantries. But those experiencing very low food security don't fare as well: Their regular eating patterns will be disrupted and their food intake reduced at times during the year because they have insufficient money or other resources for food.

The Mayors' Report

This spring, The U.S. Conference of Mayors (www.usmayors.org), with the support of its partner in anti-hunger efforts, Sodexo (www.sodexoUSA.com), invited mayors to describe the programs or initiatives that have demonstrated effectiveness in combating childhood hunger in their cities – the best practices that could guide other mayors in selecting or developing approaches to lowering a level of childhood hunger at which, by government definition, nearly 700,000 children in America cannot get enough food. Mayors were invited to describe single city-wide anti-hunger initiatives or one or more specific projects that target children in their schools, neighborhoods, or families.

This report illustrates the wide variety of approaches being taken in 24 cities of all sizes in all regions of the country. The 41 initiatives described range from mayors' efforts to organize anti-hunger efforts city-wide, to examples of how cities are making national programs fit their unique local situations, to examples of how individual institutions, such as schools and hospitals, are creating innovative solutions to their cities' childhood hunger problems.

Federal and Private National Programs

Most of the anti-hunger efforts described in this report rely on the collaboration of a wide range of community agencies and organizations, public and private, for their success. With few exceptions, they involve the implementation of programs supported by federal funds – principally, the USDA's Summer Food Services Program – and/or programs promoted by private national organizations such as Feeding America (formerly America's Second Harvest).

- Use of USDA's summer program is described in the report by Allentown, Dubuque, Honolulu, Lauderdale Lakes, Pocatello, San Francisco, and Seattle.
- Feeding America's national Backpack Program (called the Backpack Buddies program in some cities and Food 4 Kids in others) is described by Charleston, Dallas, Louisville, Oklahoma City, and Santa Fe.
- Feeding America's national Kids Cafe program, which provides free meals and snacks at community locations and schools, is described by Charleston, Chicago, Dallas, and Richmond.

Backpack Programs

It's clear that providing schoolchildren who are at risk of hunger with backpacks filled with nutritious food to be consumed over weekends and holidays when they do not have access to free or reduced-price school breakfast and lunch programs is central to many cities' efforts to combat childhood hunger. (Feeding America indicates that 2,200 of their programs serve more than 90,000 children each year.) One city's program administrator summed up statements offered by many others, saying that "kids who go to bed hungry and worry about where their next meal will come from cannot concentrate in school and will fall victim to relying on welfare programs in adulthood." Put another way by a school principal, "When hunger ends, learning begins."

As this report shows, there are variations in the way a backpack program is implemented in individual schools across the cities, but all adhere to a basic model in which: the students needing food are identified by school staff in a position to know the students' and families' needs; the backpacks given to students are nondescript, to avoid any stigma being attached to their use; and the food provided is "kid-friendly" and requires little or no preparation.

While Feeding America backpack programs are described in this report by several cities, other models of backpack and take-home food programs benefiting children are described by Baltimore, Chicago, Dubuque, Evansville, Lansing, Louisville, Pocatello, and Stockton.

Food Banks and Other Innovative Programs

Not surprisingly, food banks play significant roles in a wide range of programs described by more than half of the cities in this report; they are the primary operators of programs described

by Baltimore, Charleston, Chicago, Dallas, Dubuque, Evansville, Louisville, Oklahoma City, Pocatello, Santa Fe, and Stockton.

Beyond the national models being adapted by many cities are unique, innovative, and effective programs targeting specific needs, often in specific communities. For this report, examples of such programs have been provided by:

- Boston, where the Healthy Baby/Healthy Child (HBHC) Program targets communities disproportionately affected by infant mortality and other health disparities, and two pilot “farm-to-school initiatives” encouraged students to make healthy food choices during the school year;
- Columbus, where the Capital Kids after-school program provides participants with a nutritious snack and a safe place to learn and play when school is out;
- Honolulu, where the Partners in Care homeless coalition prints and distributes an Oahu Homeless Help Card that lists phone numbers of groups that provide no-cost food and meals and other resources;
- New Haven, where the City returned to a self-operated school food service program that has produced a 73 percent increase in the number of meals containing fresh fruits and vegetables or unprocessed foods;
- Philadelphia, where the Mayor’s Task Force on Hunger is increasing the impact of existing public-private and federal food assistance partnerships, and the hospital-based Philadelphia Grow Project is targeting children with nutrition-related health problems and their families, providing them comprehensive, long-term remediation;
- San Francisco, where the San Francisco Food Security Task Force is pursuing a City-wide plan to ensure all residents can obtain a nutritionally adequate and culturally acceptable diet, and to increase residents’ participation in federal food assistance programs;
- Santa Barbara, where the Harding School Cafeteria Project, a sustainable, school-based program, provides healthy meals, nutrition education, and accessibility to fresh and organic produce, and has achieved an 83 percent waste diversion rate;
- Seattle, where “Baby Cupboards” at food banks are stocked with infant formula, diapers, baby food, and clothing, and “Baby Boost” information fairs at community centers and food banks offer low-income parents information on breastfeeding, the WIC program, and child development and community resources for families;
- Spokane, where the Women’s and Children’s Free Restaurant is providing well-balanced meals and high-quality, high-nutrition perishable grocery items at no cost to low-income food-insecure women and their children;
- Stockton, where the Mobile Farmers Market Program, a farmers market on wheels, distributes healthy, nutritional items, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables, and nutrition education free of charge to low-income families with children and seniors.

Societal Costs of Childhood Hunger

While the origins and designs of all of the initiatives described in this report vary across the cities, the program operators' views of the societal costs of childhood hunger are consistent: In school, children experiencing hunger score lower on tests, are more likely to be absent due to illness, and are more likely to have to repeat grades.

One program operator captured the views of many others in a description of hunger's contribution to "an inescapable cycle of poverty" spanning generations: "When a child is unable to concentrate because they haven't eaten in days and misses a week of school because they could not fight off a simple cold, they cannot succeed in school. Lacking a solid education, they cannot find high-paying jobs. Ultimately, they are forced to remain in poverty, eventually placing their own children in the same situation."

Following in this report are descriptions of anti-hunger programs in 24 cities that share the goal of breaking this cycle of poverty.