

Issue Brief | Santa Clara County Children's Agenda

Volume 1 – Number 6 | September 12, 2008

Helping Santa Clara County Children to Thrive by Addressing Childhood Hunger and Food Insecurity

Overview: This issue brief looks at food insecurity and hunger, its impact on children's social-emotional and academic development and the federally funded programs that can address the problem of food insecurity and hunger. In Santa Clara County and nationally, these federal programs are underutilized. This results in low-income children going without vital financial support and the loss of federal funding to our county. In 2009, Child Nutrition Programs and Special Supplemental Nutrition Support for Women, Children and Infants (WIC) will be reauthorized by Congress. This reauthorization presents an opportunity to improve these programs by simplifying processes, improving access and participation rates, and improving nutrition quality.

Kids in Common and the Santa Clara County Children's Agenda:

The goal of the Santa Clara County Children's Agenda is to improve the lives of children by focusing on improving ten indicators of child well-being. The Children's Agenda is a focused, integrated initiative that engages all segments of our community and provides a common vision for our community's children. It forces us, as a community, to move from data to action and to be accountable for how our children are faring. By working together with common goals, we are acting intentionally rather than reactively to current demands and problems. These outcomes guide our work.

The three goals of the Children's Agenda are:

- Children are physically, socially and emotionally healthy.
- Children are prepared for and successful in school.
- Children live in safe and stable families and communities.

Our Vision: All our children thrive.

For more information on the Children's Agenda and to read previous Issue Briefs go to:
www.kidsincommon.org

The Impact of Hunger and Food Insecurity on Santa Clara County Children

Food insecurity "occurs whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways, is limited or uncertain. **Hunger** is defined as the uneasy or painful sensation caused by a recurrent or involuntary lack of food and is a potential, although not necessary consequence of food insecurity. Over time, hunger may result in malnutrition."¹

In a 2005 study, the Second Harvest Food Bank estimates that 14,590 children suffer from chronic hunger and an additional 35,084 struggle to find enough food to eat.²

Food insecurity is strongly associated with many negative outcomes for children:

- Young children living in households with very low food security are more likely to be overweight than children living in food secure households.³
- Mothers living in food insecure households are significantly more likely to report symptoms of depression.³ This depression can negatively impact a young child's social-emotional development.
- Food insecurity is associated with interactions where parents demonstrate less sensitivity to infant cues, less responsiveness to infant distress, and less behavior directed at fostering their babies social and emotional growth.³
- Children in food insecure households are susceptible to certain illnesses and infections including sore throats, colds, stomach aches and headaches, and are more likely to be hospitalized.⁴
- Food insecurity is associated with greater numbers of behavior problems in children such as hyperactivity, aggression, and withdrawn behaviors. These children have more difficulties getting along with their peers, greater odds of being suspended from school and more need for special counseling and educational services.⁴
- Family food insufficiency is associated with depressive disorders and suicidal behaviors for 15 and 16-year olds.⁴
- Elementary School children from food insufficient families were more likely to have repeated a grade, were absent from school more days and had higher rates of tardiness. According to a national study, food-insufficient teenagers were almost twice as likely to be suspended from school.⁴

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Nutritional Supports – Addressing Hunger and Food Insecurity

Nutritional supports are programs designed to address hunger and food security. Most of these programs bring federal funding to the county which not only provides much needed support to families, but also stimulates the local economy by freeing up dollars that recipients are able to spend on other purchases. At the national, state and county level, participation rates by those eligible for these programs is low. Steps taken at the national, state, and county level could have significant impact on improving hunger and food security of Santa Clara County's low-income children.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Support for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

WIC is a federally funded program that provides nutritious food, individual counseling, and health care referrals to high-risk, low-income women and children up to the age of five. The purpose of WIC is to prevent poor birth outcomes such as low-birth weight and infant mortality and to improve the health and nutrition of participants. WIC has been demonstrated to be a positive and cost-effective public health intervention.⁵

In 2002, Santa Clara County's WIC participation rate was 62.3%. Since then, the Public Health Department has increased its efforts to reach women eligible for WIC and gain their participation. As a result of this outreach and education, WIC participation rates climbed to 90% in 2005. 2005 is the last year we have data for, however it appears this participation rate is continuing into 2008.⁶

Food Stamps

The Food Stamp Program is the largest and most comprehensive federal nutrition assistance program. The Food Stamps program serves U.S. citizens and some legal immigrants meeting specific income and asset requirements. At least 25 million Americans, 20 million living in households with children, supplement their food budget with Food Stamps. The Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP) show that when Food Stamps are received, there is a reduction of the harmful effects of food insecurity on young children's health.⁷

California Food Policy Advocates (CPFA) estimates that 54% of those eligible for Food Stamps in Santa Clara County are not participating in the program. This results in more than 70,000 adults and children not receiving this benefit and a loss of more than \$83 million in federal funds.⁸ The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency has taken steps to streamline the process of applying for Food Stamps and has launched a pilot that allows Second Harvest Food Bank and other non-profit organizations sign applicants up for Food Stamps. California has several rules regulating Food Stamps that hamper access to this program. California is one of three states that require

applicants to have their fingerprints electronically scanned. This requirement is expensive for those who administer this program and has not been proven effective in deterring unauthorized use of Food Stamps. Last year, the Governor vetoed a bill removing this requirement.

Two other Food Stamp access issues are addressed by AB 2844 and AB 433. AB 2844, sponsored by Assemblyman John Laird changes the quarterly requirement for recipients to re-qualify for food stamps to a six-month requirement. Reducing paperwork saves families from the added work and decreases the risk of administrative errors. After an initial conversion cost of \$15 million, this change would save the state \$50 million annually. In California, low-income people with assets of \$2,000 or more are disqualified from receiving Food Stamps. In Santa Clara County, \$2,000 can be equivalent to one month's rent. AB 433, sponsored by Assemblyman Jim Beall, would qualify food stamp applicants solely on the income they make. AB 2844 and AB 433 are both awaiting the Governor's signature.

Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program (FRLP)

Kidsdata.org reports that in 2007, 33.5% of Santa Clara County public school students were enrolled in the Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program (FRPL). Families earning up to 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$22,880 for a family of three) qualify for free school lunches. Families earning up to 185% of the Federal Poverty Level qualify for reduced price lunches (\$32,560 for a family of three). The California Food Policy Advocates estimate that 28% of those eligible for FRLP in Santa Clara County are not participating in this program – almost 25,000 students. This is a loss of more than \$1.8 million in federal revenue to Santa Clara County.⁸

Many strategies could help more families enroll and offer administrative cost savings, allowing the state and county to bring in more federal dollars:

- School districts should ensure that they are using the automated state matching system to automatically enroll kids receiving other benefits. Related to this, the Governor should sign AB 2400 that expands the state's automated system to include Medi-Cal for direct certification.

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- Congress and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) should explore innovative methods of determining eligibility for School Lunch Programs by minimizing or eliminating paper applications.
- Congress should also study the impact of eliminating Reduced Price Lunch co-payments on participation, program and nutritional quality, and academic outcomes.

Summer Food Programs

Federally funded summer nutrition programs are designed to provide a healthy meal for children who are accustomed to eating a free, nutritious lunch during the school year. These meals help families stretch their food budget and provide essential nutrition during the summer. The participation in these programs is chronically low statewide and Santa Clara County is 35th (out of 58). In Santa Clara County, only 23.7% of those participating in the Free/Reduced Price lunch program during the academic year also get summer meals. More than 43,000 students participating in the Free/Reduced Price lunch program are not participating in a summer nutrition program. This represents more than \$2 million of underutilized federal funds. Among barriers to this program being fully utilized are low federal reimbursements for agencies operating a summer lunch program, and complicated administrative processes.⁹

This past summer, a collaborative of interested nonprofit, advocacy, County and food service organizations worked together to address the need for summer nutrition for low-income children. This collaborative sponsored 27 summer feeding sites for child lunch programs.

School Breakfast Programs

More than 89,000 students are eligible for the Free or Reduced Price School Breakfast in Santa Clara County, yet more than 63,000 students are not participating in this program. Because of this underutilization, Santa Clara County is losing more than \$14 million dollars in federal funding. More important, hungry children do not learn. Breakfast is not only important for academic performance, but can also help decrease tardiness and absenteeism. School meals can also be an important ally in the fight against obesity as meals served at school are more nutritious than meals brought from home or that children may purchase on their own from vending machines, fast food outlets or convenience stores.¹⁰ Potential strategies to improve the enrollment of eligible children in school breakfast and other school nutrition programs include:

- Congress and the USDA should increase reimbursement rates and tie increases to specific nutrition improvements such as additional servings of fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Also a metric should be designed to recalculate the reimbursement rate when food costs rise. Currently, most schools barely cover their cost for lunch and are losing money on breakfast.
- School and district officials should ensure that a breakfast program exists in their schools, particularly those schools with the greatest number of low-income students.
- Schools should adopt innovative methods for incorporating breakfast into the school day. This could include a "classroom breakfast" - breakfast served during a brief mid-morning nutrition break.¹⁰

2009 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization

During 2009, Congress will be reauthorizing the child nutrition and WIC programs. This reauthorization presents an opportunity to improve these programs by simplifying processes, improving access and participation rates, and improving nutrition quality. Congress should consider the following actions to help ensure children do not go hungry in our community:

- Establish direct certification for recipients of Medi-Cal and other federal safety net programs.
- Eliminate the Reduced Price Category and increase the eligibility ceiling to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level.
- Provide grants for demonstration projects that increase participation and provide grants to schools to serve classroom breakfast as part of the school day.
- Re-set reimbursement levels to provide for more nutritious meals and establish a more responsive mechanism to readjust reimbursement rates when food costs rise.
- Eliminate and simplify the red tape involved for schools, nonprofits and recreation programs to provide nutrition programs, particularly in areas where there are high concentrations of low-income children and youth. Create seamless delivery of school-based, after school, summer and breakfast programs.
- Provide incentives to provide whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Ensure adequate funding to support the full extent of the need of WIC and other nutrition programs.¹¹

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A Success Story and Model for Santa Clara County

In Washington, D.C. the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Nutrition created and implemented a strategic plan with clear steps and goals for revitalizing the Free Summer Meals program. Each of the plan's recommendations was implemented and as a result, more than 27,000 children ate healthy meals at a summer program in their neighborhood in summer 2005. The number of children served by the Free Summer Meals program doubled in three years. The rapid progress that Washington, D.C. made towards increasing participation in their summer meal program serves as a model for making comparable gains in Santa Clara County.

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The Children's Agenda is being led by Kids in Common, a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization.

Kids in Common advocates for policies, partnerships and investments that improve children's lives in Santa Clara County. Children need a strong public voice – a voice that promotes and protects their best interests. Kids in Common is that voice and challenges leaders and decision-makers in our community to act on behalf of children.

As the only organization that focuses on systemic change to improve children's lives in Santa Clara County, we convene agencies that care about children's well-being. We advocate for effective investment and policies for children and support the mobilization of public and private resources to meet those needs. We inform decision makers on best practices and champion local implementation. Kids in Common is steadfast in speaking and acting on behalf of children and brings a uniquely qualified perspective that is grounded in research and data. Our work is driven by the question, "Is it good for our children?"



For the most current data on how Santa Clara County children are faring, go to:

www.kidsdata.org