

Debra Cronmiller column: More people than ever in Fox Cities need help

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This week is National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week and you've been reading about these topics and what the Fox Valley is doing. Homelessness, though often too hidden, is a very clearly defined issue – either one had housing or not.

Hunger, on the other hand, is too often a more hidden problem, even though food insecurity directly correlates with rent-burdened households.

When seniors, people with disabilities and families with children pay more than 30 percent of their income for rent, a result is to unconscionable choice between paying rent and putting food on the table.

The number of Americans suffering from hunger stayed level last year, though food insecurity rates remain the highest they've been since the federal government began keeping track 15 years ago, a Department of Agriculture report released Monday found.

About 15 percent of U.S. households were "food insecure" in 2009, meaning they had difficulty feeding one or more of their members at some point last year due to lack of financial resources, according to the report. This equates to 17.5 million households total, or roughly 45 million people.

Our community has a number of systems to assist families that struggle with food security. The government response to family hunger is the Federal FoodShare program, previously known as food stamps.

This program is designed to immediately respond to the needs of families and individuals that can't provide enough food on their own.

In our area, the counties administer this program. Outagamie County, in 2010, provided food assistance to 4,792 households, or 12,892 individuals. That's more demand than has ever before been reported and more services than has ever before been provided.

FoodShare is just one response the community has to hunger. The Salvation Army and numerous faith-based organizations offer free meals to families and individuals who are hungry.

The St. Joseph Food Program provides groceries to an astounding 1,000 households a week. Many local churches assist their parishioners in need. SHARE, Second Harvest, Community 2000 and the Salvation Army also distribute food. In the Appleton Area School District, about 34 percent of our students qualified for the free/reduced lunch program and likely more were eligible but failed to apply.

Providing food to families and children who are hungry is a huge community undertaking.

Reducing the number of families with food insecurity issues means reducing the number of families living poverty.

Poverty is complicated. The importance of meeting people's basic needs is critical, as is seeing past the urgency to meet the needs of individuals in crisis and truly addressing the systemic causes of poverty.

As a community, we must commit to ensuring that every family is food-secure, has decent and affordable housing, has access to health care and can provide their children the basic education that will ensure they can be productive and self-sufficient.

Change is needed and it'll be difficult if we're to reverse the trend of growing numbers each year of people living in poverty. But the result of this change will be strong and thriving community not burdened so deeply by meeting the needs of those in poverty – a community in which we can all be proud to live.

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