

Panelists Say Hunger is Spreading in Connecticut; Solution Requires Wider Perspective

Ellen R. Delisio | Dec 6, 2013



A widespread paradigm shift in how hunger is acknowledged, viewed, and addressed is needed as a long-term solution to the increasing number of people who are hungry or otherwise food-insecure.



L to R: Panelists Ellen Teller, Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, Gloria McAdams, and Doug Hall gave presentations on the extent and impact of hunger in U.S. and Connecticut on Thursday at Middlesex Community College in Middletown. ELLEN R. DELISIO PHOTO

“We’re trying to move people away from the idea that emergency food is the answer,” said Lucy P. Nolan, executive director of End Hunger Connecticut! at the group’s first symposium — “Rich State, Empty Plates” — Thursday at Middlesex Community College. “We’re looking at wages and how hunger impacts health, education and the achievement gap.”

About 175 people attended the symposium, which included presentations and the chance for small-group brain-storming sessions on policy options and activities to address issues that compound hunger and that hunger exacerbates. The symposium was aimed at lawmakers and agencies that work with low-income people.

Despite Connecticut’s ranking as the second wealthiest state in the nation, the number of hungry individuals and families continues to grow. Connecticut has the fifth highest rate of child poverty in the U.S., up by 17 percent from 2008, Nolan said. And despite having one of the highest minimum wages — \$8 an hour — 21.1 percent of working families are poor. Studies show that the state’s food insecurity rate — which is defined as a lack of assured access to food — is 13.4 percent.

What those who work with families in need know is that hunger impacts children’s development, education, health, and the state’s achievement gap between low and high-income students, which is the highest in the nation, Nolan said. Low-income students are less likely to graduate from high school and pursue higher education, often leaving them stuck in lower-paying jobs.

Poor nutrition among infants and young children can slow development and lead to repeated illnesses, noted Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, research and policy director for Children’s HealthWatch. One idea being considered in some areas is having hospitals and health centers screen patients for food insecurity and have the means in-house to sign them up for benefits, she said.

Even with benefits such as food stamps, now called SNAP, families often have to make difficult choices about food purchases and sometimes fall back on cheap, fast and junk food, leading to obesity and other health problems, Nolan noted. Recent federal cuts in SNAP benefits are making it even more difficult for people to get by.

The opinions of many legislators that food banks will pick up the slack is simply unrealistic, several speakers said. “We already are serving people who are not eligible for assistance, people not using

benefits and people whose benefits have run out,” said Gloria McAdam, chief executive of Foodshare. “There is no way for us to grow that big (to serve more people.) We need a paradigm shift.”

Since many people who are eligible for food assistance don’t receive it, Foodshare is using volunteers to help people apply for SNAP benefits in Hartford and Tolland Counties and enlisting community groups to help fill gaps in support. At the same time, some banks are trying to help clients become more self-sufficient. One group called Fresh Place requires clients to work with staff members on long-term solutions in order to receive food. “We have to figure out how to feed them in line, but also how do we shorten that line so they don’t come back the next week and the next,” McAdam said.

Part of the reason for food insecurity is that while national economists have declared the recession over, Connecticut’s unemployment rate remains high and many of the jobs lost during the worst of the recession have not been replaced, according to Doug Hall, director of the Economic Policy Institute’s Economic Analysis and Research Network. “Connecticut never really recovered from the 2008 recession,” Hall said. The state needs to create almost 150,000 jobs to get back to its pre-recession level. At the same time wages have been declining statewide, he said.

Gloria McAdam, chief executive of Foodshare, warned that foodbanks cannot fill the need caused by cuts to the federal SNAP program.



ELLEN R. DELISIO PHOTO

Dissension in Congress has made it difficult to keep low-income families’ needs in the forefront, but for those working to end hunger, it is important to keep policy makers and legislators on task, said Ellen Teller, director of government affairs for the Food Research and Action Center. “You have to stay on a common message,” she urged. “You have to agree to do no harm; you can’t fund one program by cutting another.” Encourage lawmakers to visit your agencies and meet the clients, so that they can hear their stories, she added.

Nolan said that she hoped attendees felt energized by the discussions and were ready to try new approaches to combating hunger. “I think the majority of people are feeling like they can band together and do good stuff,” she said.

View the story online here:

http://www.ctnewsjunkie.com/archives/entry/panelists_say_hunger_is_spreading_in_connecticut_solution_requires_wider_pe