

SECOND OPINION

A virtual meeting of The Sun's editorial board, where issues are discussed, opinions made.

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Upcoming editorial: Hunger at the holidays

Here's a preview of an editorial we're working on. Let us know what you think. The best comments will appear alongside it in the print edition.

The economic downturn that has caused millions of Americans to lose their jobs, homes and sense of financial well-being has also produced a dramatic increase in the number of people who go to bed hungry at night. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported last week that nearly 50 million Americans -- including almost a quarter of the nation's children -- lacked consistent access to enough to eat in 2008. That was the highest figure recorded since the department began keeping such statistics in 1995.

In Maryland, by most measures the one of the wealthiest states in country, as many as 456,000 residents are at risk of hunger for at least part of the year, according to the Maryland Food Bank, which collects and distributes foodstuffs to needy families and individuals.

Food bank officials say that 205,000 children and 73,000 senior citizens in Maryland are at risk, and that the USDA statistics are already a fact of life for workers at local food pantries and soup kitchens: Since the recession began, demand for such services has gone up 50 percent in some areas, with the biggest increases coming among the working poor and the newly unemployed, many of whom would have been considered middle class just a year ago.

At the same time, the recession has wreaked havoc on donations from food producers and private individuals. This year food bank officials began renting trucks to haul foodstuffs from as far away as Rochester, N.Y., after local supplies fell short. They've also revived a classic strategy of the poor: Asking farmers to let them collect the gleanings from a field after the harvest comes in.

Even so, charitable groups are having a hard time keeping up. Demand is growing fastest in Baltimore County and in Kent County on the Eastern Shore. Meanwhile, there's persistent need in Baltimore City and in the state's rural areas. Last year the food bank distributed some 18.6 million pounds of food across the state, and that was only enough to satisfy a fraction of the need. Officials estimate the food bank would have to distribute nearly 80 million pounds of foodstuff a year to end hunger in Maryland.

Efforts to reach needy children are a particular priority because good nutrition is crucial to kids' long-term physical and mental development. With its local partners, the food bank runs several programs targeted to at risk children, including a so-called "backpack" program for public school students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The agencies prepare a backpack of food for the children to eat over the weekend when school is out. They also operate school-based food pantries that are open to parents who volunteer to work at their kid's school.

Such programs are an enormously effective use of limited funds. Every dollar donated to the food bank buys three pounds of foodstuffs, and every five-dollar contribution pays for two week's worth of school lunches.

Still, the need is profound, despite the fact that in a state as affluent as Maryland it often goes unrecognized. Yet for those willing to see, it's as close as the face of the child sitting next to yours in school, as familiar as the laid-off worker next door or the elderly neighbor forced to choose between the paying the electric bill and buying groceries.

There have been days this year when the Maryland Food Bank closed to volunteers at 11 a.m. because it was already out of food for them to sort and pack. It's a reminder that while the holidays traditionally are the busiest time of year for charitable groups, hunger never takes a holiday. We hope Marylanders will remember the state's neediest in their holiday giving this season, as well as the fact that the need will still be there long after the holidays have passed.

Posted by [Andy Green](#) at 6:38 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#)

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