



Study Reveals Alarming Hunger Trends Nationally; Local Trends Echo the Findings

Feeding America's nationwide "Hunger in America 2010" report demonstrates a 46% increase in "food insecure" citizens since 2006

San Luis Obispo County – (February 2, 2010) – Feeding America, the national network of food banks that includes the Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County, now provides food assistance to 37 million people across the United States. That's a 46% increase in the number of people seeking emergency food compared to four years ago.

The "Hunger in America 2010" study, released today, highlights a variety of very disturbing trends. For instance, Feeding America reports a 54% increase since 2006 in the number of client households reporting "very low food security," meaning actual hunger. The organization also reports a 50% increase in the number of children served by member food banks over the past four years, with an even more dramatic rise in the number of Hispanics seeking food assistance: 66%.

According to Feeding America, "Hunger in America 2010" is the first study to spotlight the connection between a weak economy and increased needs for food assistance. Data for the study was collected in 2009, in the heart of the current recession, when unemployment topped 9%. In contrast, when the last study was performed the unemployment rate hovered around 5%.

The current study mentions that many food bank clients are first time users of the Feeding America network. It also quantifies some of the tough choices low-income people are making. 46% of client households report choosing between food and utilities, for example. 39% choose between food and the mortgage or rent. 34% can't cover both food and medical costs.

"These new figures from Feeding America should be of great concern to all of us," says Carl Hansen, Executive Director of the Food Bank Coalition of San Luis

Obispo County. “They not only signal that a great many citizens are suffering immediate need, they also suggest threats to our healthcare system, to our schools, to industry—indeed to our future—as so many struggle with hunger and malnourishment.”

Hansen notes that the hunger situation in San Luis Obispo County is in line with the nationwide findings of the Feeding America study. His Food Bank Coalition conducts direct food distribution to families at 28 sites around the county. “The number of households we serve through these family programs has jumped almost 40% in the last year,” he said. “We’re now helping about 40,000 people through our direct programs.” That doesn’t take into account the food that flows from the Food Bank through 200 non-profit agency partners, who have also seen a big increase in year-over-year demand, Hansen points out.

Hansen and his staff at the Food Bank spotted local trends in food insecurity during 2008 and 2009 and began identifying ways to address the problem. “The solutions are unique to each demographic,” Hansen says. For instance, the Food Bank reaches the low-income senior population well through its Senior Brown Bag program and family programs. Feedback from clients and volunteers indicated that seniors weren’t always receiving enough food. “We found ways to boost our average brown bag weight by five pounds, and we’re able to provide more dairy products now and a bit more meat.”

The “Hunger in America 2010” report corroborated a conclusion staff at the Food Bank had reached several months ago: its programs were not covering the Hispanic population in SLO County well enough, particularly families with children. Those suspicions were validated through interviews with school district staff in key areas of the county last fall. This led to the piloting of a new, school-based program, Healthy Food for Local Families, in Paso Robles, Atascadero and Oceano.

Hansen explains that Healthy Food for Local Families utilizes school district personnel and client volunteers to set up a “farmers market” style food distribution—emphasizing fresh produce and other nutritious food—two weeks each month in the three communities. When parents are working and can’t come to collect food, staffers organize drop offs. “By partnering with school districts, we believe we have found the way to conquer the main obstacles to reaching Hispanics and other low-income families with children: transportation, language and comfort level. We’re now looking for funding to expand Healthy Food for Local Families to new areas.”

For more information on Hunger in America 2010, visit www.feedingamerica.org.

To read about local trends and programs, and to find out how to help, go to
www.slofoodbank.org.

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About the Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County: The Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County opened in 1989. Today, the organization is the only countywide source of large quantity donated and low-cost food for low-income families, seniors, children, veterans and the disabled. Through direct programs like the BackPack Program for school children and the Senior Brown Bag Program, and in partnership with over 200 SLO County agencies, the Food Bank provided about 5.5 million pounds of food for the tables of about 15% of the county's residents in 2009.

P.O. Box 2070, Paso Robles, CA 93447 · Phone: 805-238-4664 · FAX: 805-238-6956

www.slofoodbank.org