

No excuse for hunger in California

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The holidays are a time to gather with family and friends to share food and gratitude. This year's may also bring tense political discussions following an extremely divisive election year.

National elections elicit strong emotions, yet it is the policies enacted afterwards that have a profound and lasting effect on individuals, families, and communities.

While we may disagree on matters of politics or values, there are some things upon which all Californians can agree: No child should go hungry in the state that produces most of the nation's food. No family holding down two full-time jobs should struggle to put food on the table. Hunger, in the wealthiest state in the wealthiest nation, is unacceptable. Hunger is not a partisan issue.

Hunger is often invisible, but it exists among us. We must address the root causes: inequity and poverty. Despite its wealth, California has the nation's highest rate of poverty, according to the Census Bureau's Supplemental Poverty Measure. Nearly 40 percent of low-income Californians lack consistent access to enough food — more than 4.1 million households. These are our neighbors, our elders, our children.

California can make a significant impact in reducing hunger. We must make a commitment to address economic instability, improve health and provide a path to get ahead. Charity can build community and fill a need, but it does not fix the root causes of hunger. It takes more than food to fight hunger.

How can we break the cycle of poverty, hunger and poor health, which are cause and consequence of each other?

First and foremost, we need ample jobs with sufficient wages. Research is clear: as incomes rise, household food security increases.

As we work to increase wages, we also need to reduce the stress of expenses on struggling households. Affordable and accessible housing would certainly free up more resources for food.

Addressing California's housing crisis is not a simple endeavor. As we strive to reduce housing costs, we should take immediate action to make quality child care more affordable and available. The average cost of infant care in California is now more than in-state tuition at a UC!

For many working families, child care and housing costs leave little money for food. We can help working families through universal preK, or with increased child care subsidies and tax credits. This would dramatically shift household resources to other basic needs like food. Quality child care also ensures good nutrition in early care settings, giving kids a healthy start in life.

A strong social safety net is a powerful tool in this fight. Far from creating a 'poverty trap', research shows that the safety net reduces poverty, increases economic mobility, and strengthens economies. An estimated 645,000 low-income California seniors are food insecure, yet only 18 percent of eligible seniors participate in CalFresh, the state's most impactful nutrition assistance program.

According to the Public Policy Institute of California, CalFresh lowered the state's poverty rate by 2.4 percentage points, the most effective among social safety net programs. CalFresh, school meals, and WIC can help people change their lives for the better.

California can lead the way for our nation in these divisive times. Hunger, poverty, and poor health are not inevitable. We must be big and bold to make lasting improvements in people's lives. Now, more than ever, we must work to create a California where no one goes hungry. Ending hunger is something we must – and can – do together.

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