



OP-ED by Julie Yurko

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Breaking Down Barriers to Address Food Insecurity

On a recent Saturday morning, more than 300 cars lined up in a parking lot at Joliet Junior College awaiting volunteers with Northern Illinois Food Bank to load their vehicles with free groceries. While some visitors to the regularly scheduled pop-up market were familiar faces, many were families experiencing food insecurity for the first time.

Nearly 18 months after the start of the pandemic, Northern Illinois Food Bank's pop-up and mobile food markets remain an all too common sight in suburbs like Joliet, Elgin, Aurora and across countless other communities. Despite a recovering economy and a return to routine for many, hunger continues to be a very real issue for families across the 13 suburban and rural counties that Northern Illinois Food Bank serves. Last year we distributed an unprecedented 100 million meals to our neighbors through our 900 local pantry partners and programs, and this year we estimate that 21 percent more people will face food insecurity (compared to pre-pandemic levels), which equates to 350,000 people, including 100,000 children, who will not have enough food to thrive.

Among the encouraging responses has been seeing federal and state benefits programs bend, shift and pivot using temporary waivers and increases to help those who are food insecure quickly enough to make a difference. Most notably, the Biden Administration's recent SNAP benefits increase which took effect on Oct. 1.

Yet according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture ("Household Food Security in the United States in 2020") 6 of 10 individuals who are food insecure are not accessing federal, state and local free food resources and assistance available to them.

For those facing food insecurity for the first time, it can be challenging to navigate our nation's charitable food system, with the most common barrier being not knowing where to turn for help. For others who find themselves without enough food for their families, the stigma of simply asking for help can itself be a barrier, evoking feelings of embarrassment, guilt, fear and a sense of isolation.

The first step to overcoming these barriers is raising awareness of charitable food resources and destigmatizing the experience of asking for help. By comparison, when someone loses a job, it is standard practice for their employer to work with them to navigate unemployment benefits, outplacement services and other resources to mitigate financial disruption. It's time this same consideration and normalization around access to help is provided equitably to those who are food insecure as well.

Other barriers include the impending expiration of federal and state food assistance programs and protocols. These include telephonic signature waivers, which allows SNAP applicants to complete paperwork remotely rather than in-person, as well as the Advance Child Tax Credit for 2021, and child nutrition programs such as P-EBT (Pandemic - Electronic Benefit Transfer), which assists families to help pay for meals when schools are not operating in-person and children are unable to receive school, childcare or summer meals. These temporary programs put in place during the pandemic remain desperately needed and should be made permanent.

Throughout the pandemic many food banks had to redefine themselves to meet the unprecedented demand for assistance. In addition to mobilizing in the communities we serve by expanding access to nutritious food through pop-up markets, Northern Illinois Food Bank formed specially trained teams to assist families, veterans, seniors and students with food assistance benefits, including helping with SNAP applications, providing referrals to local food pantries, claiming child care tax credits, and securing supplemental nutrition support for women, infants and children through programs like WIC.

Food banks have also innovated ways to improve convenience while preserving the dignity of those in need of food assistance by extending hours, eliminating proof of income or identity, expanding the variety of food available, and piloting programs that allow people to order the food they want online and have it delivered directly to their home. Northern Illinois Food Bank is currently piloting such a program in partnership with Door Dash.

We encourage everyone to join Northern Illinois Food Bank and make your voice heard to break down barriers around food insecurity by engaging with neighbors, employers, civic groups, friends and others to advocate and spread awareness for resources and remove the stigma around asking for help. Contact your elected officials to express support for permanent increases and extensions of policies and programs that will alleviate hunger.

We all have a role to play developing an inclusive, supportive and equitable culture in which anyone in need of food assistance has direct, immediate access to resources without shame.

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