

Many Georgians go hungry needlessly

Federal funds underused

By Stephen Gurr

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More Georgians are going hungry than ever before, and many aren't getting the help that's available.

A decade ago Georgia ranked 22nd in the nation in what the USDA terms "food security." Today the state is fourth-worst.

"It's not always been like this in Georgia," said Sara Beth Gehl, deputy director of the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, a nonprofit research organization which earlier this year released the report "Reaching Georgia Tables." "Part of it is Georgia has been hit harder in this recession than some other states."

The result is food banks inundated with requests, while federal dollars set aside for hunger go unspent.

Federal benefits have been expanded in the recession, but officials estimate that at least 30 percent of Georgians eligible for food stamps aren't getting them. While some shun the perceived stigma of food stamps and turn to other sources, many others don't know they're eligible, Gehl said.

"That's a factor in a recession especially, when you have people eligible for programs who have never been eligible before. This recession is reaching families that have never experienced food insecurity before."

The institute is urging state officials not to cut eligibility workers who identify and sign up new food stamp clients. Gehl said as many as 733 eligibility workers could be laid off if another 3 percent budget cut is mandated at the state Department of Human Services.

"Georgia should expand, not reduce state eligibility workers," Gehl said. "In a recession, demand rises so drastically that we need to go above and beyond what we're doing currently."

Kay Blackstock, executive director of the Georgia Mountain Food Bank, agreed that underuse of food stamps and other federal nutrition programs is a problem.

Today 20 percent of Hall County residents live in poverty. The percentage of people experiencing food insecurity runs higher than the poverty rate, Blackstock said.

“There are so many people who are eligible for benefits who are not getting them, so we’re scrambling,” said Blackstock, whose agency this week distributed a 70,000-pound shipment of food to 16 agencies. One food bank partner was expecting 500 people for a redistribution later in the week, when 300 used to be the norm.

Blackstock said people eligible for food stamps should turn to food banks as a supplement or emergency stopgap. And food stamps can fill the shortages at food banks of milk and fresh produce, she said.

“It’s a good balance,” she said.

But while the money for federal food benefits is out there, millions go unused each year. The Georgia Budget and Policy Institute estimates that between 2004 and 2007 — a period prior to the recession — an estimated \$500 earmarked for nutrition programs in Georgia was not spent.

“The money’s already allocated,” Blackstock said. “It’s sitting there.”

Local officials are uncertain whether feeding programs for children are underused. In Hall County schools, the percentage of students eating free or reduced meals at school has grown from 32 percent in 2000 to 56 percent.

Hall County Schools Nutrition Director Cookie Palmer said officials do everything they can to keep eligible people from feeling stigmatized by the benefit. Applications are confidential and there is no way for children in a lunch line to know who is eating for free.

“We do everything we can to make it available to them,” Palmer said. “Our cashiers and managers are trained to be confidential and compassionate.”

One area of the school lunch program that remains severely underused across Georgia is summer meals. The institute said almost 90 percent of students in the state eligible for free summer meals did not get them, largely because there were no means of serving them locally.

Within the boundaries of the Hall County school district, the only children eating free lunch during the summer are those attending summer school.

Blackstock said officials need to tap into federal stimulus money to hire more eligibility workers who can sign people up for nutrition programs.

“If you’ve got government cutting staff and downsizing, who’s going to take up the slack?” she said.

This year the food bank’s partners are working to make sure no one has an empty cupboard on Christmas Day.

“This holiday season is very, very important, but as many people in this business will remind you, the need doesn’t go away Dec. 25,” Blackstock said.