

'You have to know why you get up every morning.' - Dan Buettner, Blue Zones founder

Food insecurity troubles state



Thomas Felke
Guest Columnist

The issue of food insecurity — the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food — has improved according to the latest data from Feeding Florida.

Food insecurity rates in the United States decreased once again according to the 2019 report. The national rate reported is 12.5 percent, a decrease of 3.3 percent against the reported rate from 2013.

However, food insecurity rates remain at a historical high, even with this decrease. The food insecurity rate for Florida (13.4 percent) is estimated to be higher than the national average.

This is also the case among the five counties (Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry, and Lee) constituting Southwest Florida.

Food insecurity rates in these counties range from a low of 10 percent in Collier County to a high of 14 percent in Glades County.

With the exception of Collier County, the four remaining counties all post rates at or above the national average.

The issue of food insecurity is particularly concerning among children and older adults in Southwest Florida. It is reported that child food insecurity in Southwest Florida is above the national average for children and on par with the State average.

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More than 200 volunteers from Collier, Lee and Charlotte counties filled the cafeteria at Bonita Springs High School to pack food for the needy. The Packing For A Purpose event was sponsored by the Bonita Springs-Estero Realtors Leadership Academy. The food was packed on Saturday, July 20 and will be distributed to the Bonita Springs Assistance Office and the Harry Chapin Food Bank.

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Feeding America does not collect data at the county level on older adults. This is an unfortunate circumstance for Southwest Florida given its significant population of older adults.

The food insecurity rate in Florida is estimated at 8.4 percent for the population age 60 and older.

Local food pantries, including mobile food pantries, still see large populations in need of service. These critical efforts are necessary to providing sustenance to those in need, particularly to those unable to travel due to limited transportation options or weather-related conditions.

Organizations have begun to make a concerted effort to provide not only food to their clients, but healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables. It is important that these efforts be expanded

in order to provide nutrients for children and older adults.

The expansion of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefit use at farmers markets is one way to increase this trend. Some of these markets are already located near Southwest Florida communities with high rates of poverty and SNAP benefit usage.

Combining the idea of SNAP expansion to farmers markets, healthy food procurement policies, and the development of mobile markets could have significant positive impacts to not only reduce food insecurity but increase health and nutrition in our communities.

Using the partnerships established from Blue Zones Project Food Policy Committee, I think we will see these types of efforts expand throughout Southwest Florida.

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