

Practical Solutions for Ending Child Hunger in Yavapai County

Opportunity

What if it was possible to add dozens of new, sustainable local jobs per year, some in rural areas of the county? Develop a marketplace that kept local dollars in our community? And greatly improve the availability of healthy nutrition for *all* children and their families living in our county? The following White Paper summarizes how this is not only possible, but has *already started to happen* in Yavapai County and many communities across the country.

Service Gaps

The 2012 *Yavapai Child Hunger Survey* examined the prevalence and severity of child hunger by zip code. Cornucopia Community Advocates of Sedona surveyed all child care providers and public schools in the county to count the number of children who appear to be going hungry, appear to be malnourished, overweight/obese, and/or are diabetic. What began as a survey evolved into a comprehensive report, *Ending Child Hunger in Yavapai County*, (ECH) that examines many data streams to determine the level of child hunger in Yavapai County. Major findings of this research:

- In 2010, Arizona had the *second highest* poverty rate in the nation (21.2%) - only Mississippi ranked higher. During 2000-2010, poverty in Arizona *rose 52.5%* (from 13.9% to 21.2%).
- The general public remains *unaware* of the exceptional growth and extent of hunger in our communities in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession. Much of the increase in poverty is due to the “*working poor*” consisting of formerly middle class individuals and families who lost their economic security.
- By 2012, *one in four* residents of Yavapai County had become food-insecure - unsure of having a regular supply of meals due to reduced income and increasing food prices.
- *One child in three* is now living in a household without regular and healthy meals. The ECH report estimates between *9,000 to 15,000 still hungry children* live in Yavapai County.
- Our county has three “*food deserts*” – areas that lack local access to healthy, fresh foods - located in the rural northern and southern portions of the county and in an urban section of Prescott Valley. Low-income families in these areas must travel to distant major grocery stores and supermarkets or else buy lower-quality, higher-cost food at convenience stores.
- Many of the foods that low-income families become accustomed to - because they are more affordable or available - are *unhealthy* (highly processed, high in fat, salt and sugar, with preservatives and additives) and lead to obesity, malnutrition and poor health outcomes. By the time they reach kindergarten, young children in low-income households lacking

consistent meals and adequate nutrition achieve *below* the same level as their peers who have better diets.

- Research shows that hungry, malnourished, overweight/obese and diabetic children are more likely to fail in school, have reduced intelligence, and develop serious health problems.
- Only 9% of our child care providers offer federally funded meals to children; and 11% offer *emergency weekend meals for children under age 5*. Only 65% of our public schools offer free/reduced cost meals; and 21% offer *emergency weekend meals for students*.
- More than one-third of our communities *lack* emergency food resources (food banks, pantries, or soup kitchens). In communities offering emergency food, limited hours of operation block access to *working parents* and individuals. Few food emergency food resources are open after normal 8 am - 5 pm business hours or on the weekends.
- The total number of Yavapai County residents facing hunger on a periodic or ongoing basis is estimated at 36,720 (17.5% of our total population) – roughly the number of people living in Prescott.

Outgrowing Hunger

With abundance and prosperity all around us, it may seem hard to believe that so many children are missing meals and going hungry. But the facts documented in the ECH report speak for themselves. How we *react* to this information becomes crucial. We can *help* or *hinder* food-insecure children and their families by denying the problem, by blaming hungry persons for their inability to sustain themselves (harder to do with children), and by persisting in the belief that our nutritional safety net still meets community needs. These lines of thinking maintain the status quo and a downward trend towards increasing hunger.

At this point, no one knows what future actions might be taken by state or federal governments affecting the growing numbers of hungry children – but regardless of what may come to pass, we can significantly improve *our* local economy, food security, and future by making some strategic investments.

By focusing collective attention in a coordinated approach to resolving child hunger, we can put self-sustaining solutions in place to resolve hunger *for the entire region – and create a significant number of new jobs and economic markets*. Through partnerships linking the resources of nonprofits, city and county governments, small business leadership, schools and child care providers, civic groups, and the financial support of local grant-making organizations for seed funding, a number of key initiatives can now be launched.

With the “obesity epidemic” claiming 1-in-3 children and 2-in-3 adults, there is a national movement toward prevention that is gaining momentum - and that we can participate in. Currently underutilized programs that are available for PreK-12 students bring a coordinated approach to educate all children (and their families) about healthy eating, nutrition and sanitation, growing edibles, and physical exercise. They also provide child meals that meet new child-nutrition guidelines. With each initiative and the programs they entail, we can impact and

improve the quality, availability and affordability of healthy foods by promoting and increasing *local* food production and markets.

Small grants can be used to encourage and support small farmers in the southern region of the county and the Verde Valley, where vegetables and fruits can be grown year-round (including eggs and other food products). Small grants can also be used to fuel development of community gardens in churches, schools and many other locations. This farm-fresh food will be made available for hunger relief agencies and school district food services. It can also be sold at farmers markets, especially in food deserts, so that low-income families who rely on WIC and SNAP have the opportunity to buy healthy fresh food in their own communities.

Ending Child Hunger Initiatives

The following five initiatives address strategic areas of hunger in our county. While these initiatives require persistent effort to implement countywide, they are *investments* that produce a lasting impact with sufficient power to reduce and eventually eliminate child hunger in our county.

Food Programs for K-12 Students

Build partnerships among community nonprofits, community resources and school districts to increase healthy meals and nutrition education for hungry students.

- Provide startup funding to school districts that wish to begin or improve their meal programs for economically disadvantaged students.
- Develop community-based healthy meal catering services to supply small school districts, especially those in food deserts.
- Engage nonprofit leaders and Yavapai Serves (VISTA/AmeriCorps) in assisting development of food and wellness programs for school children.
- Encourage Farm to School purchases of healthy food from local growers.

Food for Young Children through Child Care Providers

Build partnerships among community nonprofits, community resources and child care providers to offer healthy meals for hungry infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers.

- Provide seed funding to bring in child meal and wellness programs to child care providers that want them.
- Develop community-based healthy meal catering services to supply child care providers.
- Engage nonprofit leaders and Yavapai Serves (VISTA/AmeriCorps) to assist in application processes and coordination.
- Encourage purchases of healthy food from local growers.

Food Desert Eradication, One Community at a Time

Build food resources in three food deserts through collaboration between communities and funding resources.

- Engage local emergency and commercial food resources in developing at least one healthy food outlet that furnishes affordable healthy food.
- Explore options of restaurant-catered meals for schools and child care providers, develop farmers markets, grocery store enhancements, and/or community gardens.
- Promote nonprofit-school partnerships in developing **summer meals** programs. Help with seed funding, if needed.
- Engage nonprofit leaders and Yavapai Serves (VISTA/AmeriCorps) in assisting development of meals programs, community gardens, and classes in nutrition and cooking.
- Encourage purchases of healthy food from local growers.

Community Safety Net

Build resources that increase child and family access to free or affordable emergency food resources in communities throughout the county.

- Form a leadership team to increase the number of food-insecure children receiving food assistance through federally funded programs, such as WIC, SNAP, school meals, etc.
- Promote “best practices” in the nutritional safety net (such as backpack programs). Educate teachers and child care providers to recognize when children are going hungry, and identify children at-risk for malnutrition.
- Establish a toll-free *Hunger Helpline* that food-insecure persons can call to help them utilize the closest or most available emergency food resources.

Network for Emergency Food Providers

Build more effective emergency food resources through coordination and expansion of existing services, especially in communities of high prevalence and/or severity of hunger.

- Promote networking and sharing of resources; hold an annual summit.
- Develop a countywide calendar for food drives and fundraising events.
- Focus grants on providers willing to improve food services.
- Provide training to build the capacity of providers for sustainable operation.
- Create resource pools for sharing equipment and storage facilities.

Neighborhood Action – 7 Things You Can Do to Help Right Now!

1. Ask your **neighbors who have children** if they are having to cut back on the quantity and/or quality of food during these hard times - and if so, offer to share healthy food between your families.
2. Learn how to utilize **emergency food providers** in your area (see the ECH report or check online www.yavapaikidsbook.org). Find out about the nutritional safety net and see if you (or your neighbor) qualify.
3. Ask your homeowner or neighborhood association if it wants to sponsor a presentation on gardening by a Master Gardener. Explore your neighbors' interest in creating a **community garden**. Call one of the resources below to locate a Master Gardener for assistance.
4. Persuade your homeowner or neighborhood association to sponsor **nutrition or cooking classes**. Contact one of the resources below to arrange a series of classes.
5. Ask your mayor and county supervisor to describe how he/she provides **support for emergency food providers**.
6. Schedule a talk on hunger for your organization with a local expert.
7. Compile **stories about food-insecure children and families** and send them to one of the resources below. Privacy will be respected when using stories to increase public awareness of current hunger needs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Cornucopia Community Advocates - 928-284-3284 - www.cornucopiacomunity.org

Verde Food Council - 928-593-0755 - www.verdefood.org

About the Authors

Harvey Grady is the researcher and author of *Ending Child Hunger in Yavapai County*. He is the founder and president/CEO of Cornucopia Community Advocates and is acting board chair of the Verde Food Council.

Julie Hall Allison is a recent Prescott Area Leadership graduate and a Yavapai Regional Partnership Councilmember for First Things First.

Both are members of the Arizona Department of Economic Security Hunger Advisory Council.