



More Families Coping With Hunger

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GLORIA PENNER (Host): Hunger is facing one in seven American families according to a new report released by the Department of Agriculture. The San Diego Food Banks says its emergency food program more than doubled since June 2008 to serve 75,594 local families this year. We asked Mitch Mitchell, chairman of San Diego Food Bank, how food bank lineups have changed with the economy. And here's what he had to say.

EUGENE "MITCH" MITCHELL (Chairman, San Diego Food Bank): In this crisis, a lot of people are struggling who've never struggled before in their lives. And so you have all ethnicities, you have families, you have individuals, you have people that were making 75 to 100 grand a year two years ago and are making minimum wage and working 30 hours a week. You also now are seeing more government employees. You're seeing military members. It is not unusual to go to distribution and see man and women in uniform standing there waiting for free produce. It's a sad fact, but it's a true fact that we have families that are struggling in all walks of life. It's not what you thought it was in the old days - people who are chronically unemployed and homeless. Now it's people who are good, hardworking individuals who just have had a run of luck in which they've lost their job, can't find a job, or they're underemployed, or they're furloughed. And they need the support of the San Diego Food Bank. We acknowledge that and we're doing everything we can to meet their needs.

PENNER: Joining me now to discuss hunger in San Diego are J.W. August, managing editor of 10 News, and Ricky Young, government editor of the San Diego Union-Tribune. Welcome to you both. We've had slowdowns in recessions in the past, J.W. Why do things seem to be worse now for people who are going hungry and in poverty?

J.W. AUGUST (10 News): It's a perfect storm. We have many elements in the community coming together to cause this very serious problem. Underemployment, unemployment, the high cost of real estate, medical care, and the food stamp program the county has to deal with this is not serving the community it was set up to.

PENNER: So that's the reason. But I was also thinking about the kinds of jobs that we offer in San Diego. According to the workforce partnership, 40% of the jobs in San Diego don't pay enough for people to be able to live here. Now, what I'm looking at is why our leaders are creating more jobs like this. For example, expanding the convention center, which would create more low paying tourist type jobs.

RICKY YOUNG (San Diego Union-Tribune): There are a lot of low paying tourism jobs. But increasingly what you're hearing them discuss are the jobs that will be created by the construction of that, and the library, and possibly a new city hall. They're looking at that as sort of - you keep hearing the New Deal and the Great Depression referenced as a way to say these projects would create higher paying construction jobs.

PENNER: Well J.W. mentioned the food stamp program and food stamp participation rates in San Diego County are among the lowest in the nation. We asked Murtaza Baxamusa of the Center on Policy Initiatives why our county has done such a poor job or providing access to aid.

MUTRAZA BAXAMUSA (Director of Research & Policy, Center on Policy Initiatives): To rely on public assistance such as food stamps is a difficult choice for a family to make and it really is the avenue of last resort. And it should be viewed by this viewpoint by those that are administering the service. If there are innumerable hurdles and questions on the consequences of applying for the program, then that factors into decisions by families into whether they even apply for this kind of public assistance. So the easier we make it, the more we open our doors in these times of economic hardships for these eligible participants to come and feel the benefits of this public program so that they don't have that difficult decision in choosing between putting food on the table and providing healthcare for their kids or going looking for a job. The easier we make it, the better it is for our county in order for it to recover economically.

PENNER: Explain to me, J.W., why there are insurmountable obstacles for people trying to get food stamps.

AUGUST: Well they do make you run a gauntlet, the county does. It's I think in part because you have a conservative board of supervisors and are perceived by them conservative constituency. And the interest isn't so much about taking care of the poor or those less fortunate. It's more about law enforcement and those issues that get them elected and reelected.

PENNER: I'm wondering what this really says about San Diego. That people have such a difficult time accessing help like food stamps.

YOUNG: Well I should say it's not insurmountable. And in fact they've enrolled more people in the program. There's been a 67% increase in the last five years from about 90,000 to the current 150,000 on food stamps. And the supervisors have laid out a program over the next three years to try to increase that. They used to have only 25% of the people eligible signed up, and they've increased that to 35. Now that said, they're still the last out of 24 cities in that particular statistic.

PENNER: But you're saying that our local leaders on the county side are addressing the issue.

YOUNG: They are taking it seriously in part due to some coverage we had in the paper that brought attention to it. Marti Emerald picked it up on the city council, not really their role but the county put it on board.

PENNER: Ok, well thank you.