

ECONOMY

The face of hunger in New Jersey isn't what you think

Carlos M. Rodriguez *Guest Columnist*

The U.S. economy is stronger. GDP continues to increase, unemployment rates sit at a 49-year low, and inflation remains steady. However, despite these gains, nearly four in 10 New Jersey households cannot afford basic necessities like food, and the number of families struggling has only risen since 2010.

Hunger affects every single one of our 21 counties, impacting over 900,000 residents, but you might never know it. It's an issue that hides in the shadows — it touches our friends, neighbors and co-workers, and until we start recognizing the true face of hunger, we will never develop the right solutions to address the problem of food insecurity in the state.

Why aren't we noticing that our New Jersey neighbors are hungry?

A new report provides part of the answer. The United Way of Northern New Jersey recently released its ALICE report, which offers a different perspective on poverty by looking at "Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed" households in our state. These families earn enough money to be considered above the federal poverty line but less than the basic cost of survival, which includes housing, child care, food, transportation and health care. The findings are shocking.

According to the study, 38.5 percent — or 895,879 — of New Jersey's 3.2 million house-

holds can be classified as ALICE. This is four times the state's poverty rate, as dictated by the U.S. Census Bureau — an alarming and misleading disparity at a time of increased economic growth. From 2010 to 2016, the number of income constrained households grew a staggering 19 percent, but not because they aren't working hard. Over this time period, the cost of living outpaced the rate of wage growth 28 percent to 12 percent.

As president and CEO of the Community FoodBank of New Jersey, the largest food bank in the state, I see the injustice of hunger everywhere. Take one of our clients, Delisa, who works part-time as a home health aide and lives with her son, who works full-time, and three grandchildren. Even with two paychecks, they can't make ends meet. Delisa visits their local pantry every month for supplemental nutritious food, and she stretches what she receives as far as possible. Delisa and her family are our hardworking neighbors in need, and yet, you wouldn't know it if you passed them on the street.

Delisa and her family are not alone — nearly 330,000 ALICE households in New Jersey are families with kids. Without access to healthy food, these children could fail to reach their full potential as hunger can have severe and lasting effects on their physical, mental and emotional development. Studies have demonstrated that hunger can put kids at higher risk of poor health, low educational

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attainment, economic dependency, low-skilled employment, violence and crime, substance abuse and depression. We must prioritize nourishing children from the very start of life, particularly in the womb and through the developmental years of life, to lay the right foundation for their futures and the well-being of society as a whole.

To do this, we must look beyond the national statistics that tout economic growth, growing wages, near-full employment and low poverty rates. Creating a food secure Garden State requires us to dig below the surface and to understand who is hungry, ask why, and consider how we can help. The New Jersey Assembly, led by Speaker Craig Coughlin, D-Middlesex, has taken important steps to address food insecurity in the state with a comprehensive legislative package that addresses food deserts, food waste, access and other items critical to ensuring residents are well-fed. We must build on this effort and bring all partners to the table — government, nonprofit, private sector — to tackle this issue which affects so many, especially those who are working.

In the midst of this holiday season, look around you. Some of the people you encounter along the way may be struggling with hunger, though you wouldn't know it at a glance. Today, we see overweight and undernourished children, seniors making tough choices between essentials like medicine and food and parents work around the clock but still can't make ends meet. Only when we take a look around to see who is really hungry can we help nourish our neighbors in need.

Carlos M. Rodriguez is president and CEO of the Community FoodBank of New Jersey.