Hunger in Utah

Center for Persons With Disabilities

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HUNGER IN UTAH

May 29, 2009 by JoLynne Lyon

Hunger happens here.

It is the subject of an "Access Utah" segment aired on Utah Public Radio on Thursday, May 14. One of the experts interviewed is Jeanie Peck, director of the Child Care Nutrition Program administered at the Center for Persons with Disabilities on the Utah State University campus.

In this month’s newsletter, Peck also discusses how to encourage young children to eat what's good for them. To listen to the Access Utah segment, click on the link below. If you prefer, you can scroll down to a transcript of the program.

hunger

Transcription of Access Utah Program

May, 2009

And good morning, welcome to the second half of Access Utah. I'm Kerry Brinthurst. In Utah, one in seven children aged five and under is going hungry. That's according to a National Food Insecurity Report released this week that shows that one in seven children aged five or younger does not know where they will get their next meal. Joining me to discuss some of the aspects, whether it be emotional or nutritional aspects of these statistics is Tim Schultz, he is with the Utahns Against Hunger. We're also joined by Jeanie Peck, director of Child Care Nutrition Program on the campus at Utah State University through the Center for Persons with Disabilities. She's also a licensed clinical social worker. Want to welcome the both of them to the program this morning. Welcome to you Jeanie and welcome to you Tim joining us over the phone.

Jeanie: Thanks, appreciate being here today Carrie.

Carrie: Hi Tim, are you with us? Okay we're not hearing Tim, but we'll see if we can get him on the phone. We're also hoping to be joined sometime in the program by the director of the Utah Food Bank, Jim Pugh, talking to us hopefully about some of the statistics of hunger in the state of Utah, especially those affecting young children. And Jeanie, you work directly with the daycare providers of these young children and as we reported, the statistics nationally are showing that a number of these younger children are not getting the meals that they sometimes require. Are you finding that to be true within the state of Utah as well?

Jeanie: I think that's very true for those children who are not in daycare, or those who are in daycare and then when they go home, we're having reports from providers that children often don't receive the nutritious meals at home. They'll come with a donut and a Coke in the morning and have to send it home with Mom, because the providers aren't allowed to let them bring food and so they want to feed them nutritious meals.

Carrie: And so they monitor that rather strictly?

Jeanie: Exactly

Carrie: Are there any personal accounts? I know you probably gather statistics, but what are the daycare providers telling you as far as some of the circumstances that they're finding some of these children might be facing in their daily nutrition needs?

Jeanie: We have a couple of providers that have shared different incidents with us. One said that the parents that bring their children to her daycare work 12-14 hours per day at a nearby meat plant, but they often make the comment that they're thankful that their children receive good meals during the day there, because by the end of the day they are so exhausted that they know that they're not going to get a good nutritional dinner at home.

Carrie: Well and I think with these statistics showing that, I think it's one in four of every Utahn reaches the poverty level at some point, that brings to point that it's not necessarily a matter of not having the financial means of providing nutritious meals, but sometimes parents do feel overworked and it might be a matter of just having it not be a priority.
Jeanie: I think so. I think sometimes parents are too exhausted at the end of the day, they may not know about nutrition and how important it is for children, because it does make a difference in their lives. We know that children to develop normally, both physically and emotionally, they need to have good nutrition.

Carrie: What do you think, as a licensed clinical social worker, some of the emotional aspects of a child, that they might face when they don’t necessarily know when they might eat again?

Jeanie: Well I think a lot of it is, is that if they’re concerned about where their next meal is going to come from, or what they’re going to eat, they can’t focus on being a kid and being able to play. And a child who is hungry is likely to be tired and irritable and contrary and sometimes a hungry child is so contrary that he won’t eat. He’s too tired and hungry and that can cause parents to become frustrated. It can become a behavior problem. There can be lots of behavior issues and it only boils down to the fact that the child is hungry and they don’t know how to take care of that, because they haven’t learned that when they’re hungry they eat, because there may not be food in the home for them to eat.

Carrie: Now as you oversee these daycare programs, do you provide training to the daycare providers, or what is told them when they might see a situation that is questionable as far as a child getting the adequate nutrition that they need?

Jeanie: That’s one of the nice things about the food programs in Utah. They’re called the Child and Adult Care Food Programs and they do receive training at least once a year, plus we go into the home three times a year to visit with the providers and ensure that the meals that they are providing are nutritious as well and follow the guidelines that the federal government has given us, that they provide all of the components that are there.

Carrie: So they provide the nutritious meals, at least one a day. They also are looking for maybe any physical or emotional aspects of a child being hungry, maybe listening to some of the stories that might be told. So once a child care provider suspects that there is maybe some delinquency in nutrition, is there a procedure that they follow? Is there anything that can be done at the point to maybe help the family?

Jeanie: Well a lot of the providers will call and ask for handouts that they can give to the parents. We always give the providers lots of handouts at our training classes.

Carrie: Packets of information?

Jeanie: Just information that they can give to the parents so that they know, and a lot of our providers, they serve these children three, four, five meals a day and they’re only reimbursed three meals a day. But they know that these children need those meals and so they’re very good at serving meals that are nutritious and good for these kids.

Carrie: You’re listening to Access Utah. During this half hour of the program, we’re discussing the statistics and information regarding a National Food Insecurity Report that was released this week that shows one in seven Utah children aged five or younger does not know where they will get their next meal and Jeanie Peck is director of the Child Care Nutrition Program for the state of Utah through Utah State University. Also joining us is Tim Schultz with Utahns Against Hunger and Jim Pugh who is director of the Utah Food Bank. If you have questions or comments on this topic this morning, call us at 1-800-826-1495. And let me welcome Jim to the program. Good morning to you Jim.

Jim: Good morning.

Carrie: We’re talking again about some of these statistics related to childhood hunger and in particular, those who are aged five or younger. Now Jim we know there is a need for food services in the state, but along with seeing more of the recently unemployed seeking assistance, do you have any indications there is an increase in the number of children who are receiving food bank services?

Jim: Yes, you know what of the things we’ve seen this last year is that not only are the numbers up and are up fairly dramatically, we’ve seen about a 30 percent increase in most of the emergency food pantries that we talk to, in the number of clients that are coming in, but we’re also seeing more and more families that are put in a situation where they need support. Right now, over 40 percent of the individuals that access emergency food right now in our system are actually children and that number has continued to rise as economic times have gotten more difficult.

Carrie: Did you say 40 percent?

Jim: Yes

Carrie: Wow. How do you go about gathering those statistics?

Jim: You know we work with the network of emergency food providers throughout the entire state and so in each community, there is an emergency food pantry or regional food bank and we collect numbers from those groups on a monthly basis and also conduct surveys with them to try and get an idea of the trends of what’s really going on in their local community, as well as the direct services that we provide here in Salt Lake.

Carrie: You know and I don’t think as I’ve donated items to the food bank that I’ve necessarily thought, is this something that might be nutritious to a child, or even something that might appeal to a child. I know that in your call for additional support, is there some type of food product that might be more nutritious to a child, or that might encourage them to eat more nutritious that we could donate?
Jim: Yes, you know one of the challenges that we run into oftentimes is not having access to enough high protein type items and fresh fruits and vegetables, or even canned fruits and vegetables, so oftentimes when we do a food drive, you’ll hear us do things around turkeys, peanut butter, tuna fish, canned chilies, canned stews, items that have high protein in them that we can get out to families that need them. We also have some direct feeding programs that we work with, with children as well here at our warehouse. We have a program called, Kids Café, and we’re working with 19 different low income after school centers to provide an evening meal for kids at these programs. Many of the kids in these programs are getting school breakfast and lunch at a reduced rate, but oftentimes would go into an after school program without any sort of meal service and so everyday we’re preparing about 1,200 meals at our kitchen, delivering them out to these sites to make sure that they can get a warm nutritious meal at these after school programs to help meet the needs there.

Carrie: Now you mentioned fresh fruits and vegetables. I know we were having a discussion here in the office the other day wondering if you can donate fresh foods, or if it has to be something that’s packaged?

Jim: Absolutely. You know this year we’re on pace to collect and distribute about 23 million pounds of food out of our warehouse and about 30 percent of that is fresh and frozen products. And we oftentimes don’t advertise them much during the food drives, because we don’t want people leaving perishable items at a drop off location, but people can always come down to our warehouse and drop off items, so if you have a garden and you’ve grown a little bit of extra product that you don’t have a use for, we’d encourage you to donate that product. If you have extra fresh or frozen items, feel free to donate those to the food bank. We’d love to take those items and get them out to families that need them.

Carrie: Well and I happened to notice when I was picking up seed packets a week or so ago, some fun interesting vegetables, purple carrots, these type of things that could be grown and what a great way to maybe have your children grow some produce for other children to be donated to the Utah Food Bank. Bringing in now Tim Schultz with Utahns Against Hunger and Tim, you’ve listened to our conversation this morning and obvious from Jeanie and Jim that there is a need for services for children in the state of Utah, we should mention that this report does leave Utah somewhere in the middle as far as the number of children not getting the adequate food that they need throughout the day, but you say that there’s always a concern about solving hunger issues in the state?

Tim: Well yes, I mean hunger is unfortunately sort of a byproduct of our economy and you know as the economy dips, hunger tends to rise, but we’re never going to be in a situation where hunger unfortunately is completely eliminated through just private or economic means. We have to have a strong government presence in bringing solutions to these problems. It’s not a problem that can be tackled by the private charitable food network or through enough work. Certainly hunger goes up and down, but you know our economy just presupposes that there’s always going to be a certain number of people that are out of work.

Carrie: So you feel that these federal programs, such as the one that Jeanie oversees, the one for daycare providers are definitely providing a service that will always be necessary?

Tim: Yes, at least unless our economy were to radically change. But most people don’t realize that if you look at the entire universe of free food that’s available to low income or struggling household, only about 15 percent of that comes through private charitable resources and the rest of that, the vast majority of it is made up by government programs such as CACFP and through food stamps, through school nutrition programs, senior congregate meals, Meals on Wheels, all of those programs are government-related programs designed to ensure that people in our society have enough to eat.

Carrie: Well I know the U.S. Department of Agriculture has a campaign currently, End Hunger by 2015, is that goal something that can be achieved? Should we be discouraged?

Tim: No, we should not be discouraged at all. If hunger is going to be solved in our country, it’s going to be solved through a much stronger government presence. And I don’t mean to say anything here that should be construed as to dissuade anybody from being engaged in food banks. I worked at a food pantry myself for five years and the Utah Food Bank and the entire emergency food network in the state does excellent, excellent work and they really do prove that you can get blood from a stone. They stretch resources very far and the people that depend on those services are absolutely well served by them, but from a systemic point of view, charitable food is simply not going to be a mechanism that’s going to actually end hunger in our country. The reality is that has to be in place, as well as a very, very strong, and we would argue a stronger government support system needs to be in place.

Carrie: Okay, I know Jeanie wants to comment on this, but let me ask you Jim, as director of the Utah Food Bank, do you see your organization as simply a means of helping support the federal programs that are out there to help reduce the hunger issue?

Jim: Yes, clearly we see ourselves as part of a much bigger problem. You know, if we’re going to get into actually solving all of the issues around hunger, this gets into all sorts of issues, whether it be fair wages for employers paying workers so that they can make enough to live off of, to looking at our health care system in making sure that it’s affordable and looking at affordable housing. I mean clearly all of the issues that we’re seeing with our economy right now, hunger really is a byproduct of those and so until we get solutions to really be able to solve those bigger picture issues, you know I don’t think we’re going to do anything that’s going to eliminate this hunger. What we want to do is we want to be there in a time of emergency and in a time of need to make sure that an individual that is experiencing all of these challenges in the economy does have somewhere to go and a place that can help them get through that immediate crisis that they’re dealing with. But by no means is that solving the long-term issue that’s creating hunger, unemployment and some of the larger challenges in our economy.
Jeanie: And one of the things that I think we need to look at is that something new in the state of Utah over the last couple of months that we're realizing that there are a lot of grandparents and aunts and uncles that are providing childcare and the state Office of Education has approved that we can allow those providers who are grandparents, aunts and uncles, to be on one of the food programs and receive reimbursement for the meals that they serve and receive this nutrition training which I think will be very helpful for these families.

Carrie: So do they in essence have to become a licensed provider?

Jeanie: No, they have to pass a background check and then we as the food program go in and check their home out and train them. They have to have you know like the fire extinguisher and things like that.

Carrie: But obviously there has to be some monitoring of the program?

Jeanie: Yes and that becomes our responsibility. There are eight sponsors in the state and so wherever you live in the state, there is a food sponsor that could help a grandparent or an aunt and uncle.

Carrie: Well Tim, you talk about federal support for these programs. Do you feel that the Obama administration is seeing this as a need as well?

Tim: You know clearly they have recognized that there are concerns there. We work very closely with some of the federal programs. In fact, even some of the food that we distribute is through those federal programs and part of that stimulus funding money that came through, a portion of that was given to food banks and to emergency food assistance providers, as well as looking at the larger picture issue of federal programs. You know the question of whether that's enough, I think right now what we're doing is really trying to bail us out of a bigger problem, but you know we've really got to look at long-term systematic change if we want to make a difference in that and again that gets back to the issues of health care, housing, employment rates, all of those types of issues, much more so than just looking at what the current crisis is that we're dealing with in a three month or year long window.

Jim: I would have to agree with that completely and to the point about what Tim is saying about hunger being a part of a much bigger mosaic of issues. It really is true that hunger fits in squarely with issues of housing, with employment, with all of these things. Having said that, the Obama administration has taken some steps. Specifically they have eased up on some of the requirements that kept people off of the food stamp program for example and they've taken the steps to raise benefits to extend the availability of benefits to people who are unemployed and not able to get re-employed anytime soon. So they have taken some measures, but I think that as we go forward, again if we in this country really want to solve hunger, then we need to talk about much more comprehensive, much more systemic kinds of reforms in the programs and take a hard look at those and then decide really if there is the will to end hunger in this country.

Carrie: Well and these are of course long-term goals and I was thinking during the recent outbreak of the H1N1 virus and we had several schools that closed throughout the state and so I began thinking about in the short-term, where a number of these children, again as we have just discussed receive their main meal in a public setting, whether it be daycare or the school lunch program, what do we do in the short-term, say if something like that were to happen again. What are some of the aspects that we need to be considering to make sure that there is food in the homes?

Tim: Well I think the number one answer to that is the food stamp program which has a number of advantages and by the way, I should mention about food stamps in Utah, it's interesting that you know Utah falls you know we're right in line in lock step with the rest of the nation in terms of our rates of hunger, or maybe even slightly higher, or food insecurity I should say if we're going to stick with the proper terminology, but food stamps and other federal programs in Utah are vastly under utilized. In fact if you look at, out of every 100 families that meet the financial requirements for the food stamp program, in other words, out of 100 families that would be deemed eligible for food stamps, only 56 of those families are actually utilizing the program, which means that almost half of the people that are eligible for food stamps in Utah are not accessing the program. And that leaves upwards of $100 million in unclaimed benefits on the table every year.

Carrie: And you're saying that in turn that leads to the nutrition problems?

Tim: Well it's a potential, it's something that could alleviate the hunger problem certainly and it's also something that you know food stamps is considered one of the most important counter recessionary tools, along with unemployment insurance that we have at our disposal in this country, because it's money that gets put right into people's hands, it gets spent right away. So grocers get an immediate benefit because they see a boost in sales and for every dollar that gets spent in food stamps, it has a multiplier effect in the economy and in turn drives overall economic activity and increases the number of jobs that are available out there. And to answer your question, what we would like to see is more kids in our state accessing the food stamp program and of course in addition to some of the school meal programs that they depend on as well. So there needs to be a broad array of solutions available to folks and a much broader way of low income families to be able to access food, whether it be on an emergency basis through our emergency food network, or through the various government programs that are available.

Carrie: Well Jim as we head into the final few minutes of our program, I give you an opportunity for a call to action in support of the Food Bank. Where are you, what are your needs right now?

Jim: You know clearly we're seeing that huge increased need. We've been certainly appreciative of the communities' response. We've seen as I have mentioned a 30 percent increase. We've also though seen about a 20 percent increase in the amount of food that we've had come into our agency and I think that speaks volumes about the great community support that this community lends to organizations. You know we want to remind people that this is clearly a year round issue, it's not an issue that's going away anytime soon and it's easy to get involved.
You know we tell people that there's three ways to get involved. You can make a food donation, a cash donation, or we'd encourage you to spend an hour of your time and come down and volunteer. For individuals that need help, we'd encourage them to call 211. It's a free call from anywhere in the state that will hook them up with live operators that can walk them through what services might be available for them and can talk to them about how to sign up for food stamps, where an emergency food pantry is located and talk to them about any other services that they may need help with.

Carrie: And as director of Child Care Nutrition, since we are talking about the childcare needs of five and younger, Jeanie Peck, any final thoughts on this report and what we may learn from these statistics?

Jeanie: Well I think it's important for us to realize that these statistics occur and are real and we need to make sure our children are fed well. I'd like to share one real snippet a provider shared with us one day. She had a little girl in her home that said, "Would you show my Mommy this when she gets here to pick me up so that she can buy some of this, so that we can have it at home?" It was an apple. So that's kind of poignant to me that this little girl didn't think her Mom knew what an apple was. So I think it's important for us to educate our parents as well as our children, so that they can eat healthy and nutritious meals.

Carrie: Well, I want to thank my guests this morning. We have been talking about a recent report by the National Food Insecurity Report that shows one in seven Utah children aged five or younger is not sure of where their next meal will come from and appreciate your insights this morning. Tim Schultz with Utahns Against Hunger, Jim Pugh, director of the Utah Food Bank and Jeanie Peck, director of Child Care Nutrition Program through the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University. Again, for more information on Utahns Against Hunger and the Utah Food Bank, you can go to their website for details on how you can become part of the solution to nutrition and childhood insecurity. Thank you for joining me this morning on Access Utah, I'm Kerry Bringham.