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Addressing Holiday Food Insecurity for Our Montana Neighbors

Ah November in Montana! As the holiday season begins to shift into high gear, families across the Treasure State begin to dream of gifts, celebrations, and festive meals. However, many of our friends and neighbors will need our help to meet their basic needs, as well as our donations to bring holiday cheer to the table.

“Hunger is a serious concern for many of our neighbors throughout the year,” says Minkie Medora, RD (registered dietitian) and chairwoman of the Montana Food Security Council. “We are especially concerned about increases in hunger among our most vulnerable citizens. More than 1 in 3 children are chronically at risk of hunger and food insecurity, which is over 92,000 children across the state. The Montana Food Bank Network has seen a dramatic increase in children needing emergency food from 2009 through 2010.”

Children who are hungry struggle with school and are at greater risk for academic problems. Since hungry children have difficulty concentrating, they often do poorly in the classroom and fail to advance from grade to grade. This affects their prospects of completing school or going to college, which in turn affects their earning power as adults. Being hungry or food insecure can lead to a cascade of negative outcomes -- academically as well as socially. That’s why the Office of Public Instruction and Food Security Council (www.mfbn.org/fsc) sponsored a Montana Summit to End Childhood Hunger in September 2010.

“At the summit, we discussed long-term solutions to hunger in Montana and dispelled some myths about hunger,” explains Medora. “There is a common misperception that if adults or children are overweight, they are not poor or hungry.” In fact, poor families eat when there is money to buy food, and do without when money runs out. This results in feast or famine eating, as well as choosing low-cost food that tends to be high in calories but low in nutrients. When families are not able to have healthful, nutrient-rich food throughout the month, they make do with what is available, leading to under-nutrition.

We can all help address food security, during the holidays and all year long. According to Medora, here are three effective ways to fight hunger and feed hope in your local community:

- **Donate cash:** Food pantries and banks, like those in the Montana Food Bank Network (MFBN), are able to get their money’s worth from monetary donations. By buying in bulk and working with food brokers for deep discounts, MFBN can buy food for 8 meals with every \$1.00 donation.
- **Donate nutrient-rich foods:** If you prefer to donate food, buy needed or requested items rather than using unwanted packages from your kitchen cupboard. Useful donations include ready-to-eat protein foods (peanut butter and canned tuna or chicken), as well as chili, stews, hearty soups, and fruit canned in juice.
- **Support long-term solutions:** Across Montana, local groups are getting together to explore new solutions for food security, including community gardens, improved access to affordable food, and more collaboration among hunger agencies. Check with your MSU Extension office to find a group in your city or town.

Past and current issues of Eat Right Montana’s monthly packets can be downloaded for free at www.eatrightmontana.org/eatrightthehealthyfamilies.htm

Treasure Your Family’s Health: Back-to-Basics 2010