

Poverty, hunger near epidemic in South Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – People in South Lake Tahoe are not only hungry, but they don't know where their next meal is going to come from. That is called food insecurity. And it's a growing problem here.

Poverty, of which hunger and food insecurity are byproducts, is such a concern that a survey was recently conducted by the El Dorado County Food Bank (which receives zero funding from the county) to gauge the needs of South Lake Tahoe.

One of the big things to be revealed is that what was once considered emergency supplemental food is now something people are relying on to sustain themselves on a regular basis. Twenty-two percent of the people surveyed require emergency food assistance at least once a month – so, 12 times a year.

Ninety-two percent of respondents said food distribution needs to be more often, 89 percent want more fresh food, and 70 percent need the distribution to be closer to where they live. Twenty-three percent have no transportation.

Most who are receiving aid are older and/or disabled, with 41 percent being at least 65 years old. Seventy-five percent are unemployed. Eighty-five percent of those working make less than \$25,000 a year.

Twenty-eight percent of the households have children. And 99 percent of those have incomes of \$25,000 or less a year.

Those statistics are all for South Lake Tahoe.

Respondents were people receiving aid and agencies. They were asked 30 questions.

South Lake Tahoe is following the state's trend. For the second year in a row, the Census this month reported that California has the highest poverty rate in the country – 23.4 percent. That is 8.9 million people. Nevada came in second at 20 percent.

Carey Fong with the Food Bank spoke Oct. 21 to Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe at Harrah's Lake Tahoe about the growing issue of hunger and poverty in the city. Diane Weidinger, who runs the 25-year-old weekly hot meal program Bread & Broth, talked about that program.



Bread & Broth volunteers serve a hot meal to anyone who wants it every Monday at Grace Hall in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN file

“It’s almost an epidemic,” Weidinger said of the hunger in this community. “It’s a cycle. Once you are born into poverty, it’s almost impossible to get out without some assistance.”

Every Monday about 100 people are served a hot meal at Grace Hall at St. Theresa Catholic Church. It’s families, singles, older people – a mix of those in need. Another 40 receive a meal on Fridays at the Presbyterian Church. Other churches and organizations also give out food.

Bread & Broth is a benefactor of the El Dorado County Food Bank, while Christmas Cheer buys food from the Northern Nevada Food Bank. Fong said they’ve tried to get Christmas Cheer to

switch agencies.

The El Dorado County Food Bank brings 360,000 pounds of food to South Lake Tahoe a year, with a value of \$600,000.

The local need is growing and that is not expected to change. Nationwide there will be 79.7 million older adults in 2040. This is twice as many as there were in 2000. They are the ones on fixed incomes with transportation issues, who are in need of food.

The Food Bank is looking at how it can better cater to the needs of those in the basin today and going forward.

Ideas include having a distribution center here to help with storage issues, increasing the number of days and hours when food is handed out, nutrition education, creating community gardens, and advocating for higher paying jobs. A task force has been formed with the goal being to form an action plan.