

Next on the menu: child nutrition

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In a rare demonstration of bipartisan cooperation, Congress is poised to pass strong legislation that would improve child nutrition and tackle the growing problem of childhood obesity. For these improvements to be in place by the next school year, however, the “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010” must be made a top priority by Senate leadership who now need to move this bill to the Senate floor for a vote.

It is understandable that the renewal of child nutrition programs and other worthy public health efforts have taken back seat to health reform efforts during the past year. Nonetheless, the need for nutrition assistance by financially strapped families in our community and the rest of Nevada has only grown in that time as the recession has worsened.

Efforts to eliminate childhood food insecurity and reduce child obesity are not simply worthy public health goals in their own right, they also improve efforts by local school districts and educators who are repeatedly asked to more with less.

The evidence that hungry children do more poorly in school and have lower academic achievement because they are not well prepared for school and cannot concentrate has been known for some time. The modest upstream investments in school-based child nutrition and obesity prevention contained in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act will thus deliver well-documented, cost-effective educational and economic returns to our community for years to come.

The denial that children and families in our midst could be “food insecure” – that is to say, possess limited or uncertain access to nutritionally adequate and safe food, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in a socially acceptable way – is one of the great moral blind spots of our time.

In pre-recession data collected by Feeding America, there were an estimated 118,000 food insecure children in Nevada under 18 years of age or nearly one in five kids that age. Those conservatively estimated figures have undoubtedly grown as the economy has tanked.

Collective denial is compounded by a libertarian ethos that suggests individual and organizational charity renders government intervention in matters of childhood nutrition and obesity unnecessary.

The truth of the matter is that federally-funded nutrition assistance programs have historically complimented and strengthened the efforts of the private food assistance infrastructure and nonprofits such as the Northern Nevada Food Bank – agencies and networks affected by the economic recession and hits to their budgets just like the rest of us.

Again, public health advocates have long noted that we not only pay a much greater price for childhood hunger and obesity in terms of greater health care costs for families and employers, we also pay an educational and economic toll for matters that are entirely preventable.

The time to act is now. The health of our children depends on it.

Additional information on the “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010” can be found at <http://ag.senate.gov/site/legislation.html>. The American Public Health Association’s fact sheet on the reauthorization of child nutrition programs and other legislative priorities can be found at <http://action.apha.org/site/PageNavigator/Advocacy>.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine and Past President of the Nevada Public Health Association.