

# Hunger Hurts: My Friends' House Inc. tackles food insecurity in LA

By Rebekah Theresa Roberts

Food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle (USDA). Within the United States, approximately 12.3% of households are food insecure.<sup>1</sup> It is more likely to occur within racial and ethnic minorities as well as low-income communities.

A household experiences food insecurity if they experience either of these qualities<sup>2</sup>:

- Low food insecurity, which is a decrease in the quality, variety, or desirability of diet with no evidence of reduced food intake
- Very low food insecurity, on the other hand, occurs when there are multiple indications of disturbances in eating patterns and well as a lower food intake.

If you drive through any low-income community within Los Angeles, you can observe the high concentration of fast-food restaurants within the community's vicinity. Due to this reason, families within the community (specifically those who experience food insecurity) are more likely to eat in these fast food restaurants, where the portions are much larger, and the ingredients are high in salt, saturated fat, and added sugar. If eaten in excess, individuals have a higher chance of long-term health issues such as high blood pressure, obesity, heart diseases, diabetes, stroke, and various types of cancer.<sup>3</sup>

The greatest victims of food insecurity are children. The effects of food insecurity among children can delay development, curtail academic performance, negatively affect social skills, and lead to early onset obesity.

Although federal programs that help alleviate hunger for children exist (school breakfast and lunch programs, etc.), various reasons hinder them from taking advantage of them. According to the Food Research and Action Center, almost half the students from low-income families don't eat breakfast. Many children are unable to make it to school early enough to receive the free meal, and many are ashamed of admitting to their peers that they qualify for low-income assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology, Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County, September 2017

<sup>2</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Health, 2017

Food insecurity within the context of Los Angeles is quite ironic. Within LA County, about \$25 billion is spent on food, with \$4 billion being spent specifically on fresh fruits and vegetables. With the highest level of agricultural production within the country, California possesses a \$39 billion farm economy, producing about half of the country's nuts, fruits, and vegetables. Despite these statistics, over 1 million individuals still suffer from hunger or food insecurity within the county.

This dichotomy can be easily observed: predominantly white neighborhoods have three times as many supermarkets as black neighborhoods, and almost twice as many markets as Latino neighborhoods in LA County. Hunger hurts, but minority, low-income children are arguably hurt the most within this context.

Originally established in 1995 as a potential community center for those in the Hyde Park/Crenshaw area of Los Angeles by members of Ascension Lutheran Church, My Friends House, Inc. (MFH) has since evolved into a non-profit organization with the main goal of working towards hunger prevention and healthy living. MFH serves this mission by operating a weekly food pantry for members of the community, occasional clothing drives, and free monthly health screenings by a Parish Nurse. All of the work done to operate MFH is entirely voluntary, with no paid staff.

Each Wednesday, you will find that even before the sun rises, many individuals from the surrounding community are lined up outside of My Friends' House, patiently waiting to receive a small slip of paper with a number. The earlier you arrive, the lower your number, and the lower the number, the sooner you will be able to enter the pantry.

At 9 o'clock on the dot, the first group ( #1-10) is called to line up by the door by a volunteer. Before entering, patrons must present their number, and write down their name, age, and address (if applicable), before finally entering the pantry. Upon entry, visitors are greeted by volunteers, eventually moving through the different sections of food.

The pantry has various selections of food, ranging from seasonal fruits and vegetables, meats like chicken or beef, a wall filled with different types of bread, as well as pastries for those who have a sweet tooth. What makes this distribution so special is MFH's dedication to providing foods that are both appetizing and healthy. In this food pantry, you won't see typical snack foods like potato chips, candy, and microwaveable foods with high levels of sugar and fats. The organization works hard to provide a large variety of foods, instead of the standard canned goods commonly found at most food pantries.

What stands out most about My Friends House is the compassionate environment that the volunteers provide. Outside you'll see the friendly patrons making conversation, listening to music, and enjoying the lively atmosphere that My Friends House has to offer. A volunteer of MFH states: "The people are good people...Regardless of what their circumstances are, they're respectable, and they appreciate what we're doing."

Four years ago, Gwendolyn Jackson received an email that emphasized the need for volunteers amid considerable changes to the staff of My Friends House, Inc. "They said that they needed help, and they were also interested in anyone willing to serve on the board. So I just jumped in!" Jackson has worked as a volunteer and on the board ever since. She says the best part of her job is the satisfaction that she gets from serving. "My call has to be that of a servant. I serve whenever I can, however I can, and wherever I can."

Brenda Ilalio is a regular at My Friends House, who first attended the weekly food drive six years ago. "I started coming to MFH about six years ago. My husband and I used to come together before he passed. It supplements my food bill to stabilize my mother and I. She'll be 93 next month."

Octavia Thibodeaux, another My Friends House regular, expressed her appreciation for the organization and its positive impact on the community: "I like communicating with people. The company that she keeps. Good company brings goodness to the neighborhood. Pulling together weekly and talking about what's going on in our neighborhood will help each other live better. We need more conversation."

At My Friends' House, Inc., patrons are the priority. This wonderful organization makes a resource available that many of us often take for granted. The volunteers begin each with a smile, a positive attitude, and a sense of humility. The organization's long-term goal is to extend its outreach to more people within the community. "The patrons come in as first-timers, but it's not their last time."