

Food insecurity is real, it is in our community and you can help

America is known as the land of plenty as well as the land of the free. So with all this liberty and abundance at our disposal, why does our cup runneth over with so much hunger and poverty?

When I awoke this morning, I wasn't too

concerned with what I was having for breakfast. Sure, I considered what I wanted — eggs, toast and a glass of juice — but I didn't worry about whether or not it would be there. I had complete confidence that when I opened the refrigerator, I would find what I was seeking. If you're like me, it can be easy to take a human necessity, like eating, for granted. That's called food security. Over the last five months, in my capacity as an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America) at Women's Services in Meadville, I have seen firsthand how poverty and food insecurity can plague families and individuals and negatively influence their health and well-being. But what exactly is the impact?

First, it is important to define two key terms: food security and its counterpart, food insecurity. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), food security is defined as "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life." Food security includes food access, distribution of food, stability of the food supply and the preparation of food. Food insecurity means that "consistent access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources at times during the year." Food insecurity can be viewed as a continuum that includes hunger, malnutrition and famine.

So how many Americans are considered food insecure? According to a 2014 USDA report, 17 percent of rural households are experiencing food insecurity. Rural households with children have even higher rates (24 percent) of

**BRYNYA
BOWDEN**



food insecurity. Across Pennsylvania, food insecurity ranges from 10 to 22 percent, with a state average of 14 percent.

In November 2013, a major funding cut to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) took effect,

touching the lives of 1.8 million Pennsylvanians. SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, is our nation's first line of defense against hunger and is a powerful tool to help keep families out of poverty.

Crawford County is particularly prone to these economic realities as its residents fall far below the national levels for median income. Thus, it is no wonder that, as of September 2015, 15 percent of Crawford County residents utilized the SNAP program and more than 1,700 women, infants and children participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

The Harvard School of Public Health explored eating habits of approximately 29,000 Americans over the past decade and found that nutritional disparities between America's rich and poor have doubled. Although the ability to purchase quality food plays a key role in this divide, differences in knowledge also drive this disparity. Individuals from lower socioeconomic tiers tend to have fewer opportunities to learn about the effects of unhealthy foods and the consequences that result from unhealthy diets. Research demonstrates that additional predictors of food insecurity among Americans include unemployment and lower household assets. But what does this all mean for one's health and well-being?

Food insecurity is associated with a variety of health and well-being outcomes. Adults in food insecure households are more likely to have fair or poor health, reduced nutrient intake and have a lower quality of life. Children are

more likely to have poor health, behavioral problems, frequent stomach aches and headaches and decreased developmental outcomes. Food insecurity is also associated with a number of costly, chronic diseases, including diabetes and mental illness, in which stress and diet are often contributing factors.

Additionally, researchers at Drexel University School of Public Health found a link between food insecurity and exposure to domestic and sexual violence, ranging from fear of violence to personal experiences with rape. Exposure to violence affected mental health, the ability to continue school and thus obtain work that pays living wages, and subsequently the ability to afford wholesome, nutritious food. According to Oxfam, a hunger relief agency, "Hunger isn't about too many people and too little food. Hunger is about inequality. And women and girls face the greatest inequalities of all." When women are hungry, they are forced to make impossible choices and take untenable chances that make them vulnerable to violence. Food security is human security. Women deserve the chance to feed themselves and their families in an environment free of violence.

Isn't it time for food security for all, regardless of gender, race or socioeconomic status? We think so and are working with others in Meadville to increase access to fresh, healthy, nutritious food for all members of our community. Next month, learn more about what is happening locally and how you can be a part of it.

Recent Allegheny College graduate Brynya Bowden is an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America) at Women's Services in Meadville. Women's Services has been providing hope and resources to victims of violence and advocating to end it since 1977. For more information, visit womens-servicesinc.org. Reg Henry's column, which normally runs on Mondays in the Tribune, will be published on Tuesday.