

EDITORIAL

Let's end hunger

Nobody has to go hungry in Mesa County, but many do despite the best efforts of local government and community-based nonprofits.

The problem is not lack of caring or attention. There are dozens of stories of food pantries, backpack programs, community gardens and food recovery networks all pitching in to feed the hungry in Mesa County. But they often work in silos.

Friday's Mesa County Leadership Forum on Hunger aimed to change that. It was the first summit in the state to brainstorm innovative solutions to hunger and to discuss ways to implement the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger — a statewide initiative supported by six goals to end food insecurity in the state.

The summit was a way of getting Mesa County organizations on the same page. The discussion, as reported by the Sentinel's Wyatt Hurt, centered on strengthening hunger relief organizations, addressing out-of-school hunger, increasing fresh produce for hunger relief, expanding recovery of food waste, involving health care providers and spreading public awareness.

This is more than a humanitarian issue. Hunger impacts all of us in the way its negative consequences ripple through the community. For example, teenagers who are hungry are five times more likely to die by suicide. Hunger is linked to health, economic security and educational attainment. Having reliable access to enough healthy foods positively influences the health and well-being of Mesa County residents at every stage of life.

Federal food assistance programs are the most effective avenue to supplement the food budgets of low-income families. The Mesa County Department of Human Services issues an incredible amount of food purchasing power to people who meet eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. In 2017, 8,895 Mesa County households received an average of \$258.84 a month for a total of \$27.6 million.

But the program is underutilized, not just here, but across the state. In fact, Colorado has one of the lowest enrollment rankings in the county in both SNAP and WIC (the program for women, infants and children), ranking 44th and 48th lowest, respectively.

County officials have focused on reducing backlogs from the processing of intake paperwork to the point where people can get benefits quickly. But there are two cultural factors that seem to stymie their efforts to get more people enrolled. One is pride. Some eligible recipients would rather struggle than accept public assistance. The other is the stigma or using the benefits and being judged harshly by members of this community.

Many of these recipients work full-time jobs or several part-time jobs. They are the working poor just trying to get by. If we recognize the importance of ending hunger in the community, we must begin to change our thinking about people who utilize these resources to keep their children fed. Children who utilize SNAP benefits have an 18 percent higher graduation rate than their peers who are eligible for benefits but don't use them.

Hilltop has had tremendous success getting people enrolled in Medicaid by providing assistance with paperwork. Perhaps they could do the same with SNAP. One idea is to send an offer to help through the Kids Aid Backpack program, which provided 68,000 packs of food in 2017. A note would explain how Hilltop representatives can help families in need of assistance navigate the system.

It's these kinds of collaborations and teamwork that will make the great work of our nonprofits even more effective.