



HAWAI'I APPLESEED

CENTER FOR LAW & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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REPORT EXPLORES THE MULTIFACETED ISSUE OF SENIOR HUNGER IN HAWAI'I

To effectively address senior hunger, policymakers need to adopt a holistic framework that understands the interplay between public health, economic justice and social capital.

HONOLULU, Hawai'i — There are more than 300,000 kūpuna age 60 and older living in the Hawaiian islands. These resilient individuals are our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles—family members who have spent their lives working hard and contributing their knowledge and wisdom to build a better future for the next generation.

Our kūpuna deserve dignity and respect in their golden years. However, currently there are thousands of seniors in Hawai'i who struggle just to put food on the table.

Although Hawai'i has made strides to address hunger in recent years, current estimates place the rate of food insecurity among Hawai'i seniors between 5 percent and nearly 10 percent. Even using the more conservative estimate, this means that more than 16,700 Hawai'i seniors are at risk of going hungry.

Fortunately, the means of addressing food insecurity are within our reach. In a new report, Hawai'i Appleseed presents an overview of the tools—many of them federal safety net programs—that are available to alleviate the problem here in Hawai'i. However, solutions will need to go beyond expanding access.

“We must also identify remedies that acknowledge the importance of nutrition and that address the root cause of food insecurity: systemic poverty,” said Daniela Spoto, Hawai'i Appleseed Director of Anti-Hunger Initiatives. “These three components: access, nutrition, and community resilience, must all be put in place together to make long-lasting, systemic change.”

Federal safety net programs can be incredibly powerful tools if we use them effectively. Even as stand-alone solutions, these tools can add many healthy years to the lifespan of our seniors, while reducing the societal cost of healthcare expenditures. However, they can be even more effective when thought of as just one of three components of food security:

- Safety net programs;
- Nutrition; and
- Building sustainable community-based food systems.

This report examines each of the safety net tools with special attention to how they can be used to support the other two legs—nutrition and food systems. These safety net tools are organized into two different delivery models: nutrition benefits programs; and prepared meal programs.

Nutrition benefits programs operate similar to cash, as they can be used for food purchases at grocery stores, farmers' markets or other retail outlets. These programs offer participating seniors flexibility in what they choose to purchase or eat. Prepared meal programs address related and underlying issues that exacerbate food insecurity in our senior population, such as social isolation or health and access issues.

The recommendations in the report include specific actions for improving access to federal nutrition programs, but also for connecting these programs to our communities in ways that improve cohesion and health. Service providers and policymakers should work to maximize federal program dollars in the quest to build a food system that connects food producers to consumers, thereby improving the freshness of the ingredients available to low-income seniors while keeping capital circulating in Hawai'i's agricultural sector.

“While streamlining access to public benefits is important, we must also prioritize actions that connect food producers to local markets, and connect seniors to their communities,” said Spoto. “As a state, we should harness these tools to ensure our kūpuna have opportunities to stay connected with their communities. With better coordination, and through better leveraging of available resources, we can strengthen our hunger safety net and minimize the number of seniors in Hawai'i that experience food insecurity.”

The issue of senior hunger is complex, and often is a symptom of deeper flaws in the structure of our economy, our society, and of our food systems themselves. To effectively address the problem, policymakers need to place the issue of senior hunger into a more holistic framework—one that understands the interplay between public health, economic justice and social capital.

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Hawai'i Appleseed is working to build a more socially just Hawai'i, where everyone has genuine opportunities to achieve economic security and fulfill their potential. We change systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice through policy development, coalition building and advocacy.