



Commentary: Collin County must address food insecurity

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Collin County is projected to be [bigger than Dallas by 2050](#). As Collin County grows, in both urban development and its ability to attract new companies like Toyota, it also has to deal with some issues. And it's [not just traffic](#).

It may come as a surprise to many, that in this affluent suburb of Dallas, one of the more pressing issues is food insecurity.

Food insecurity is an economic and social indicator of the health of a community. [The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity](#) as limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods or uncertain ability to acquire these foods in socially acceptable ways. Poverty and unemployment are frequent predictors of food insecurity in the United States. Food insecurity is associated with chronic health problems in adults including diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, and mental health issues, including major depression. Families living in food insecure households often have to choose between food and paying for medical care, utilities or other basic life necessities.

According to [Feeding America](#), there are approximately 138,000 food insecure people in Collin County, which is 16 percent of the population. Of those food insecure people, 48,000 are kids. That means 20 percent of kids in Collin County are food insecure. We are all one crisis away from being food insecure and it can happen to anyone. Life events such as medical issues or job loss can lead to food insecurity.

[Asset poverty in Collin County](#) has become a normalcy – many residents are only a paycheck or two away from [losing access to food and housing](#). What's more, being employed doesn't mean that a family isn't hungry. Stagnant wages and underemployment are contributing factors to low family incomes. Access to affordable housing also makes it difficult to fit healthy food into already limited budgets.

[Communities Foundation of Texas](#) and its [CFT for Business](#) initiative recently partnered with the [University of Texas at Dallas](#) to [host a community hackathon](#) focused on addressing the issue of food insecurity in Collin County. An array of area students, faculty, business leaders, elected officials, nonprofits and residents gathered to try to creatively "hack" the issue of hunger locally.

A panel featuring Cheryl Jackson, founder of [Minnie's Food Pantry](#), Dr. [Timothy Bray](#), assistant professor and director of the [Institute for Urban Policy Research](#), and Simon Powell, chief operating officer of the [North Texas Food Bank](#), described the many layers of hunger challenges in Collin County.

The panelists highlighted the following key areas to help alleviate the issue:

- De-stigmatizing and understanding the broad and diverse identities of those who are hungry,
- A creative marketing effort to help people understand the face of hunger,
- Providing access to transportation and affordable housing so people can live and work in Collin County and get to work and have access to healthy food. In some areas of Collin County, many seniors and low-income individuals and families struggle to access healthy food because the nearest grocery store is more than five miles away.

Bray noted that neighborhoods that are overwhelmed with food insecurity are often asset rich but money poor. Residents may live in a nice house or drive a nice car, but also may have lost a job or had a family crisis that can lead to this situation. There is a need for both transparency and education about who is hungry, who is in a temporary hunger crisis, and how we need to collaborate to create ways to access resources without those who are hungry feeling demeaned. A better understanding of the real face of hunger is what our community needs.

According to [a study by The Perryman Group](#), reducing food insecurity would not just improve individual lives, it would bring a great benefit to Texas in increased economic productivity and lower health and education costs. The study also found that every dollar invested in food bank efforts to fight hunger returns three dollars to the state of Texas in overall benefits.

Nadine Dechausay, director of community philanthropy at Communities Foundation of Texas, and Raj Menon, a trustee with Collin College, were members of the winning team that proposed the idea of a new corporate benefit for food security. Employers would incorporate this benefit into their suite of offerings related to health and wellness. This benefit will pay off for employers and the community in which they are based in several ways.

First, by offering the benefit to all, the food security benefit reduces the stigma associated with hunger and raises the general level of awareness of this invisible challenge. Second, it may increase productivity and reduce employee stress, leading to greater retention. Third, it provides an additional support for employees who are facing a crisis or transition such as disability or retirement.

The team proposed that employers could customize the size of this benefit to fit the needs of their workforce and their budget. A modest version of this benefit would be cost neutral to provide – employers would advertise the number and location of the closest food pantry on medical insurance cards or around the workplace, and encourage employees to volunteer at these nonprofits. A more generous version would provide each employee with an annual allotment that could be used to address their own hunger concerns or to donate to the local food bank.

We've seen firsthand the generosity of Collin County, especially its growing corporations. Let's invest together in Collin County's present and future by decreasing the number of food insecure families and children. Let's move the needle on this.

Sejal Desai co-leads CFT For Business, an initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas focused on helping small to mid-sized companies engage in the community. Sejal is also a Dallas Public Voices Fellow of the OpEd Project.

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