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CALIFORNIA COMMENTARY: For Hunger, More Than a Handout

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November 24, 1994 | ROBERT GOTTLIEB and CAROLYN OLNEY and ELIZABETH RILEY | Robert Gottlieb supervised the "Seeds of Change" study. Elizabeth Riley and Carolyn Olney are the executive director and associate director of the Interfaith Hunger Coalition of Southern California. Gottlieb and Riley are members of the City of Los Angeles' Voluntary Advisory Council on Hunger

Today, a day to feast and give thanks, more people than at any time in the recent past are going hungry in Los Angeles. These are not only the homeless, not even just the unemployed or those on welfare. Today there are working people, retired people, illegal immigrants and native born, and children of all colors and from different communities who are not eating well or regularly. If not today, then sometime soon they will not have enough to eat, influencing their ability to function in school, on the job or in relating to others.

Indications of the scale of this hunger abound. Food banks and pantries have seen demand soar, a demand that cannot be met as donations are down and threaten to erode further. Eighteen percent of full-time workers are now paid less than the poverty level for a family of four. It is now common to work full time and receive government assistance.

With the new congressional majority proposing major cutbacks in food-assistance programs like school lunches, by next Thanksgiving hunger will be worse than ever. Some congressmen assert that charities can handle it; we know that's not true. Our food banks and pantries are stretched to the limit and we're turning people away by the thousands.

At the same time, appeals to charity and staffing soup kitchens on Thanksgiving sends the signal that hunger can somehow be solved by giving out turkeys one day of the year. But we know from our research and our experiences on the front lines that hunger--or rather the lack of food security--is not just an individual issue, it's a community concern. It's a nutrition issue, including access to healthy, safe and reasonably priced foods. It's about where supermarkets are located, and how much income has to be spent on food. It's about having jobs and making jobs. It's about farmers being local, or close enough to market directly to people who need fresh food. Food security is not about charity; it's about community empowerment.

With Republican's threats to cut the few remaining food safety-net programs and their desire to push the problem onto the states through block grants, it will ultimately be the cities that have to address the enormity of this hunger or food insecurity problem. Yet cities like Los Angeles are not equipped to deal with these issues. There is no city "food department" or "food agency," as there is for housing and environment or transportation. There is, in fact, no food security or hunger policy of any kind. If we are to deal with hunger as a community issue, then we need to both plan for and implement a new, more proactive and integrated approach.

The seeds of such an integrated approach are germinating in new community efforts and institutions:

- * Several dozen farmers' markets, including a number in the inner city, have sprung up recently.
- * Community gardens, providing a source of food and urban greening.
- * Joint ventures between community organizations and supermarkets to bring markets back to the inner city, while providing jobs and other community benefits.
- * Innovative programs at food banks and shelters that provide job training, community gardens and even restaurants for garden products.
- * Community food businesses, such as Crenshaw High School's Food from the 'Hood salad dressing.

While these efforts are impressive as grass-roots undertakings, they suffer from the absence of an integrated, citywide policy. In several communities around the country, food policy councils have been created to meet this crucial need for integration and planning. Councils help link different programs, such as the use of food stamps at farmers markets or healthy-snack programs for schools. Councils bring together different stake holders in the food system who have the capacity to map out and implement an integrated food-security approach. While most councils are city-based, they can also operate at the county or regional level, given some of the regional dimensions of the problem, such as supermarket closure and relocation.

We need a food-security policy for Los Angeles. Eighteen months ago, when the UCLA study "Seeds of Change" was released documenting widespread hunger in the community, a call for a food policy council for Los Angeles was raised and supported by many, including this newspaper. The City of Los Angeles has now established a Voluntary Advisory Council on Hunger to come up with a proposed hunger policy for Los Angeles within the year.

By next Thanksgiving, we need to be able to say that solving hunger is not just a matter for charity but has become a community policy, addressing a problem that is not going to disappear by itself, even on a day when we feast.

Free turkeys once a year don't do much for the underfed; Los Angeles urgently needs a food-security policy.