



Your Turn
Nelle S. Miller
Guest columnist

Florida says 'no' to feeding hungry kids

I read with great sadness a recent article in the Herald-Tribune that bore a headline proclaiming "Food assistance for needy kids grows."

The headline looked promising. Until, that is, you got to the part about Florida being one of 15 states with governors who have opted out of the USDA's Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer Program for Children. It is an expanded summer food program intended to provide food stamps for low-income families with kids.

One governor mentioned in the article didn't see the need to help hungry children "when childhood obesity has become an epidemic." Another said he doesn't "believe in welfare."

Such apparent cruelty, along with the lack of understanding regarding the problem of childhood hunger and its harmful lifelong impacts, is unacceptable.

The summer months can be particularly difficult for children whose families are struggling to put food on the table. These children lose access to free and reduced-price meals at school as well as pantries that provide nutritional assistance during the school year. This creates a "hunger gap" that organizations – such as All Faiths Food Bank – and funders must try to fill.

In Sarasota County, the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches hovers around 45%; in DeSoto County, 100% of students participate. This means there are thousands of children who will go home not knowing where their next meal might come from when those nutritional supports aren't available.

Research has shown that kids who experience food insecurity in their first five years are more likely to trail their peers in social, emotional and cognitive skills when they begin kindergarten – and they will have dim prospects of ever catching up. Hungry students have less energy and more difficulty focusing; they are also more likely to struggle with behavioral issues and perform below their peers academically.

There are long-term medical consequences for children who have experienced hunger, from chronic illnesses (heart disease, diabetes high blood pressure, etc.) to mental health disorders (anxiety, depression and PTSD, among others).

Recent crises – the pandemic, higher costs for groceries and other necessities, rising inflation and hurricanes – have only made things harder for Florida families that were already struggling.

Of course, the philanthropic sector has always worked hard to help our neighbors in need. For example, All Faiths Food Bank's Campaign Against Summer Hunger has raised over \$16 million and feeds more than 35,000 children every summer. But the need vastly exceeds our ability to meet it.

According to the Florida Policy Institute, the state has turned down \$250 million in nutritional aid by opting out of the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children program. It is aid that would have helped to feed more than 2 million children, according to the Florida Department of Children and Families.

Yet in Florida, which has a food insecurity rate – 11.4% – that exceeds the national average, Gov. Ron DeSantis has chosen to reject millions in federal funds that would help feed hungry kids.

We faced a similar scenario in 2021, when Florida was literally the only state that didn't apply for the extended pandemic feeding program. It was a decision that was reversed only after months of urging from advocacy and food banks, including All Faiths.

Here in Sarasota, we are fortunate to have a community that has always stepped up to ensure that our neighbors – our children – receive the nourishment they need to thrive.

If only our state leaders would do the same.

We encourage community members to reach out to the governor's office to demand answers – and to insist that we don't pass on funds to feed hungry children in the future.

Nelle S. Miller is the CEO of All Faiths Food Bank in Sarasota.