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One in four children in the Big Bend area faces hunger

By Lisa Fingerroot
Democrat staff writer

When children's advocates gather Monday for an awards luncheon to kick off Florida's 17th Annual Children's Week, celebrate 2011 accomplishments and focus lawmakers' attention on kids' needs for 2012, a lot of Florida children will be digging into their own lunches with gusto.

But the school lunch those children get Monday may be the first nutritious meal they've had since Friday, or could be the only meal they've had since school closed for the weekend.

"The reality" is that there are children who look forward to going to school to get something to eat, said Sen. Bill Montford, a Democrat from Tallahassee, a former Leon County Schools superintendent and leader of the Florida Association of District School Superintendents. The higher the unemployment rate, the higher the number of children who will go without food, he added.

One in every four children in the Big Bend area is "food insecure," said Cheryl Phoenix, executive director of Second Harvest of the Big Bend, an arm of the national Second Harvest group dedicated

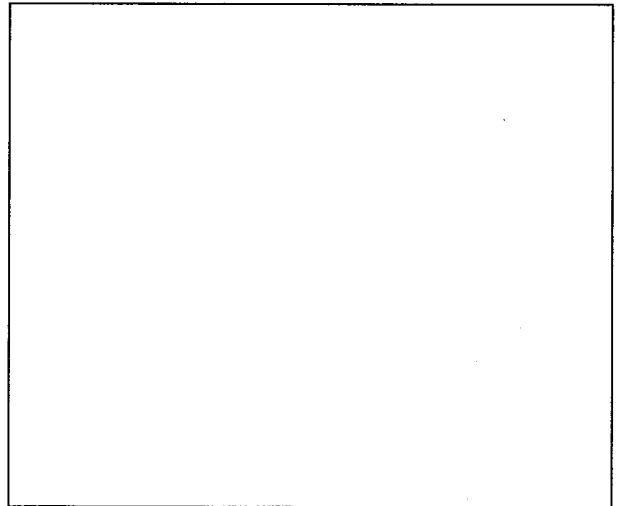
to fighting hunger. Food insecure is a term the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines as a family that's uncertain about having food or acquiring food at different times during the year.


"We see families struggling to make ends meet," Phoenix said, adding that the current percentage of food insecure people in the United States is higher than at any other time since the Depression. "The need continues to increase."

The USDA estimates about 16 million children lived in food-insecure homes nationwide during 2010, and another nearly 1 million kids lived in homes with "very low" food security, which means the normal eating patterns of one or more people in the home were disrupted and food intake was reduced because of inadequate funds.

In Florida, about 1 million children are food insecure — the actual number depends on whose data is used, but it hovers around the million mark on most all charts.

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In the Big Bend, Phoenix's organization helps put food on the table of about 13,000 children now; but the need is growing, she said. The organization is funded through private and corporate donations of money and food items, and through federal dollars that are on the budgetary chopping block.

The organization also tries to make sure some of the area's neediest school children take home some food for their family on Friday afternoons in a "weekend backpack," which is a paper bag about half full of food.

'Children shouldn't beg for food'

Sabal Palm Elementary is one of three Leon County schools that send home weekend backpacks provided by Second Harvest, which also provides them for Riley and Bond elementary schools in Leon County and Stewart Street Elementary in Gadsden County.

"A lot of people don't realize this is here in their own city," Sabal Palm Assistant Principal Shannon Haire said of the number of children who need weekend food at her school.

Second Harvest hands out 250 backpacks each Friday to children in Leon and another 100 to kids in Gadsden County. Phoenix hopes to add Nims Middle School to the group.

Sabal Palm gets 75 of the backpacks, which Haire estimates serves about a fifth

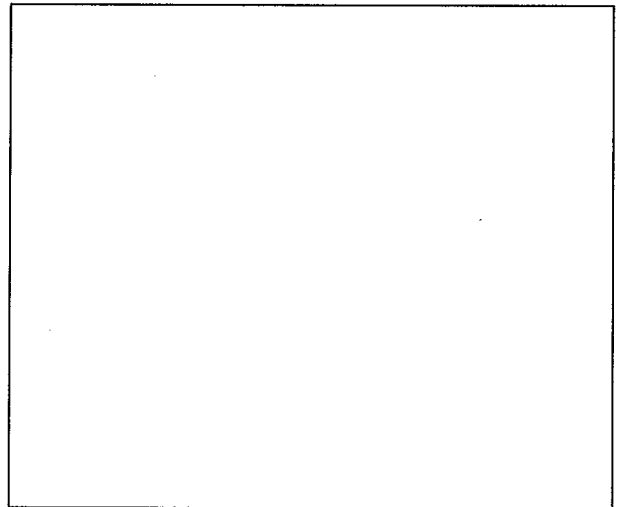
of her 550-student population because only one bag per family is allowed. Bond Elementary gets 100 bags and Riley Elementary gets 75.

Phoenix has many poignant stories to tell about the backpacks, and can show thank-you notes written by the children who take them home. But one of the more heart wrenching stories is about a child who was not on the list to receive a weekend backpack. It was so difficult to see the child ask "please" for some food for the weekend, the guidance counselor immediately asked for an extra bag that week.

"Children shouldn't beg for food," Phoenix said. "They shouldn't get excited when our truck pulls into the yard because they know then they will get some food for that day."

Sabal Palm is one of 12 Leon elementary schools allowed to serve both free breakfast and lunch to all students because the percentage of students qualifying for those free meals is so high. Six schools

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were allowed to begin the practice in 2010 and another six in 2011. Leon County has 24 elementary schools and eight middle schools. Five of those middle schools may also serve a free breakfast to all of their students because of the percentage of students eligible for the free meal.

Leon's other elementary schools also have some children eligible for free meals as do the middle and high schools. About one-fifth of Leon County's school children are eligible for free meals, estimates Leon County Schools Nutritional Services Director Cathy Reed.

"We are trying our best," Reed added. Most of the individual schools have their own fight-hunger efforts like a food pantry or some other project, and every elementary school has a "sharing table" where students can leave leftover unopened food products for others to take. Reed is also able to donate any leftover food to Second Harvest, which in turn gives it to kids in need. For example, milk that would have expired during the winter break was donated to Second Harvest, she said.

'Get embarrassed'

Because the number of weekend backpacks is limited, school personnel must figure out ways to determine who is in the greatest need and it isn't always easy because "some people are very private," Haire said. Others will contact the school and tell Haire about their difficulties, and she can help point them to others like Kenyatta Williams, the Leon County Schools

homeless liaison, or even other agencies that might be able to help.

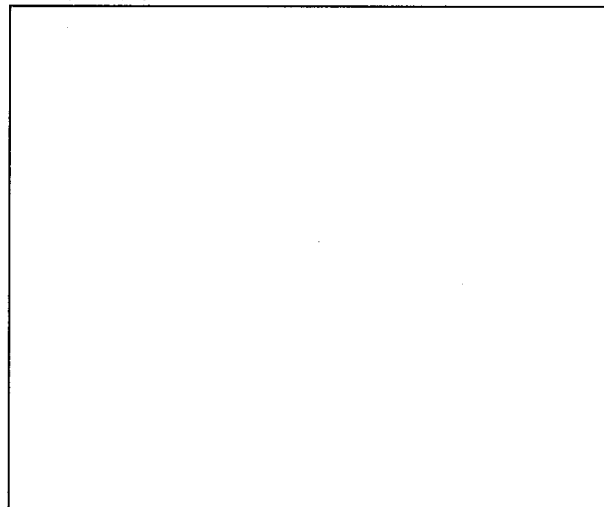
Teachers sometime figure out a student doesn't have electricity because he may be late to school and tell the teacher his family had difficulty getting dressed in the dark. Or, a teacher may notice a child's clothing is starting to look dirty and realize her clothing hasn't been washed in awhile. And children talk, even if the parents don't.

"People (adults) don't like to share," Haire said. "They get embarrassed."

Not only is poverty and its results personal, the scenarios of how a family got there are as varied as the families themselves. One thing is clear, however; they aren't the stereotypical homeless and hungry transient.

A mother might have to scoop up her children and leave home in the middle of the night with nothing but the clothes on their back because of domestic violence, Haire said. A family might be evicted

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because they were unable to pay the rent and all of their belongings were thrown into the street.

"It's hard when you lose everything," Haire said.

Sometimes a family has a home, but no electricity, or the breadwinner gets ill and loses income.

Most of the homeless children seen by Williams have been in the community for some time and only recently became homeless because the family could no longer pay rent.

"They are working every day; they just can't afford rent," she said. "A mom of three working at Walmart, she can't afford the rent around here. She's not laying out of work and she's not doing drugs. She just can't pay the rent."

Illness can be a contributing factor as well. If a parent or child gets sick and the wage earner misses time from work, the paycheck decreases, and "from there it snowballs," Williams said. If the paycheck is short, the rent can't be paid and the family is evicted, which will make a sick person worse and cause them to lose their job and "the hole is getting bigger and bigger."

'Hidden epidemic'

"There are parents who work two and three jobs and still can't make ends meet," Montford said. "Not only do you not have enough food, but you can't afford good

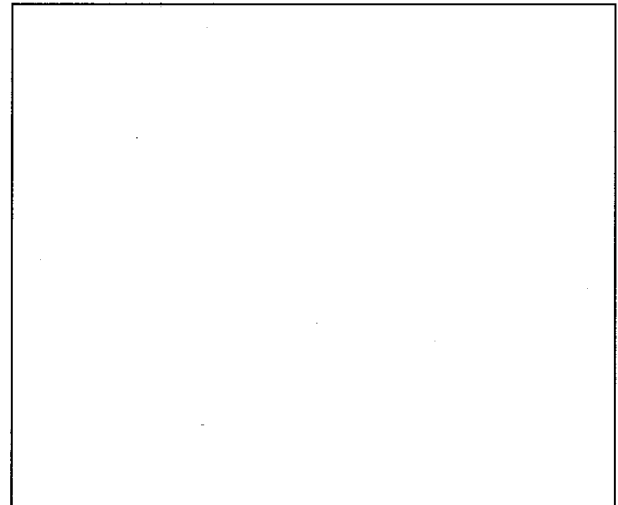
health care" and when someone in the family gets sick, the problems multiply.

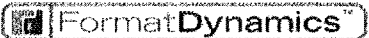
Montford is quick to talk about how the Leon County community has stepped up and helped and given to those in need, but "we have to do more," he said.

A bad economy has caused Big Bend employers, like employers everywhere, to cut costs in myriad ways, ranging from layoffs to cutting hours, and the phenomenon has created a new face for poverty and hunger, Phoenix said. These are people who have not lived in poverty before and may have landed there through no fault of their own. "A good majority of these people have a job. Now there is one (parent) working instead of two" and they must make decisions on whether to pay the mortgage, the power bill, or buy groceries, she added.

People who were once donors to Second Harvest are now standing in line to receive some of the benefits they once helped finance, Phoenix said.

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"The problem is a hidden epidemic," her coworker and Second Harvest Development Director Paul Clements said. "Parents are embarrassed. These are your neighbors. These are the waitresses that serve you at restaurants. These are the cashiers who check you out. It's people just like you and me."

Clements said Gov. Rick Scott's proposal to increase education funding by \$1 billion doesn't address hungry school children and other ills brought on by the sour economy.

"They can pump all the money they want into education," Clements said, adding that children who come to school hungry from a weekend without food, it takes about two days of free lunch and breakfast to get them back on track and they aren't ready to learn until Wednesday.

It's a matter of basic human needs, Clements said. Children must be fed and have a place to sleep at night before they can worry about education. They are not going to succeed at school unless those basic needs are met.

Hungry babies

Proper nourishment isn't just a requirement for school-age kids; babies need the essential nutrients for their brains to even develop, which is one of the reasons behind the federally funded Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) that helps keep basics like milk and cheese on the tables of pregnant women, babies and

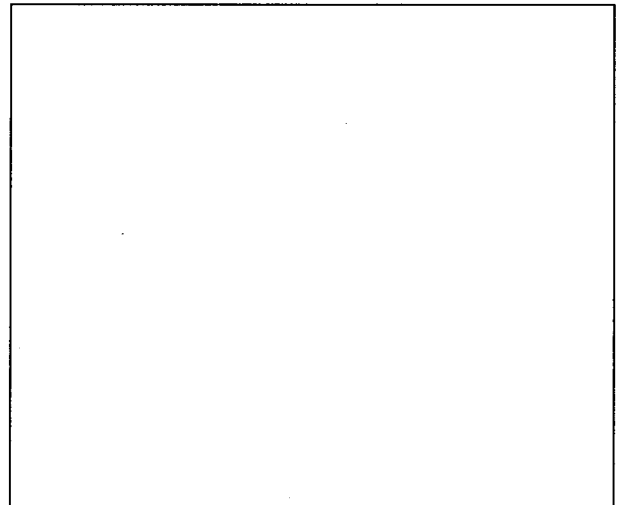
children under 5.

The lack of essential nutrients in infancy can cause educational and cognitive difficulties later in life, said Barbara Goldstein, nutritional educator at the Leon County Health Department. Her agency and others like it have had to warn clients against watering down formula to make it last longer because the client is having difficulty buying more.

"There is the assumption that if you've gotten assistance, you are fine," Phoenix said, adding that the assumption simply isn't true. The food stamp program, for example, is now the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and is designed to help, not to be a sole source of food. Even the USDA confirms the food purchased with SNAP money will last about a week even though the funds are distributed monthly, Phoenix said.

Republican state Sen. Rhonda Storms of Valrico disagrees, however. "You can feed your family with the services that are

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available," she said.

Storms has introduced a bill that would prevent recipients from spending aid money on "junk food." If people weren't allowed to buy items like chips and soda, they could make the budget go further and feed their kids a healthier diet at the same time, she said, adding that a bag of potatoes goes a lot further than a bag of chips.

Storms also has a bill making its way through the Senate that would allow Florida drivers to donate \$1 to a homeless trust fund when they renew their licenses. She would like to see more accountability from the recipients, however.

Challenges

Poverty is one of the indicators of how well children will perform on standardized testing like the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, Montford said. "Some might believe that poverty should not be considered, but those who are in the school and see these children on a day-to-day basis, the children who come to school without proper nourishment and without support from home, it makes a significant difference.

"It's not a bad reflection on the student at all," Montford said, adding that hunger and lack of good health care are not the child's responsibility but do become challenges the student must overcome.

The percentage of children living in poverty

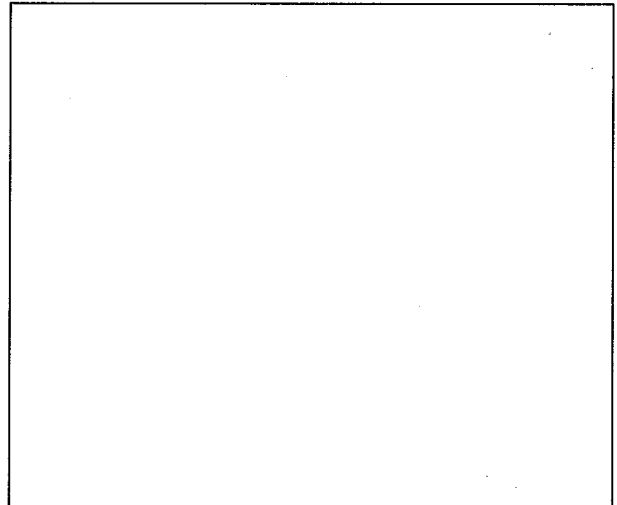
in Florida has been relatively steady for several years, but that statistic can be deceiving because of several variable factors like the ever-changing population of children and the unemployment rate, said Susan Weitzel, director of the Florida Kids Count office, which is a part of the Department of Child & Family Studies Department at the University of South Florida.


"Poverty is pretty darn low," she said. "I don't know anybody who can live on that without assistance and have shelter and pay for all their living expenses."

Because poverty-level income is so low — \$22,350 for a family of four — data gatherers tend to look at families in different kinds of groups.

For example, a family of four living within 200 percent of the poverty level, or on an income of about \$40,000. That group is the one growing most rapidly in Florida, and they are the people who have never needed assistance before, Weitzel said.

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Children's needs are increasing across the board, though. When children's advocates gather Monday and throughout the week to share ideas and information and make their presence known to lawmakers, they will be hoping to get a larger piece of the pie for their programs.

For example, funding for The Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region was cut in 2011, and as a result, it currently helps about 500 fewer people than it did in 2010, said Lauren Faison, chief executive officer.

On the coalition's waiting list for supplemental day care help is 22-year-old Lakysa Safford, the mother of 1-month-old twins, Michael and Makayla. Everyone in the family works including Lakysa, but she doesn't earn enough at her insurance specialist position at an orthopedic clinic to pay day care fees for two infants.

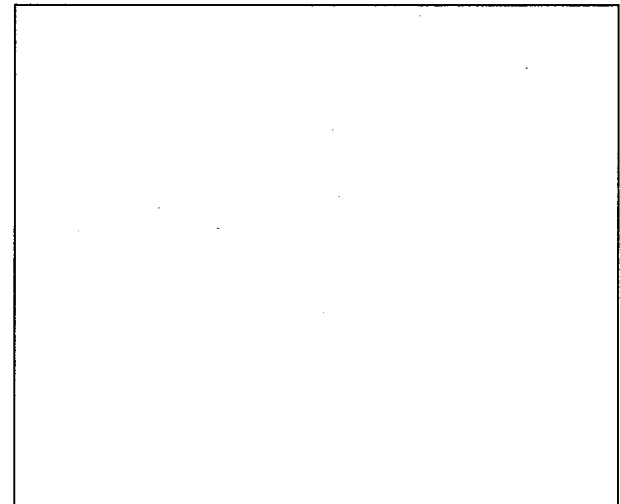
So, she and the babies' father and two grandmothers all take turns staying home from their jobs to watch the babies, which in turn causes everyone's paycheck to be less.

"They are kind of understanding right now," Safford said of everyone's employers, but she knows it's "probably not that long" before the arrangement will end and someone will lose their job and the family will begin digging deeper into that hole of poverty that the school system's Williams sees.



Every week, Second Harvest of the Big Bend packs up 350 bags of food for distribution to kids who are

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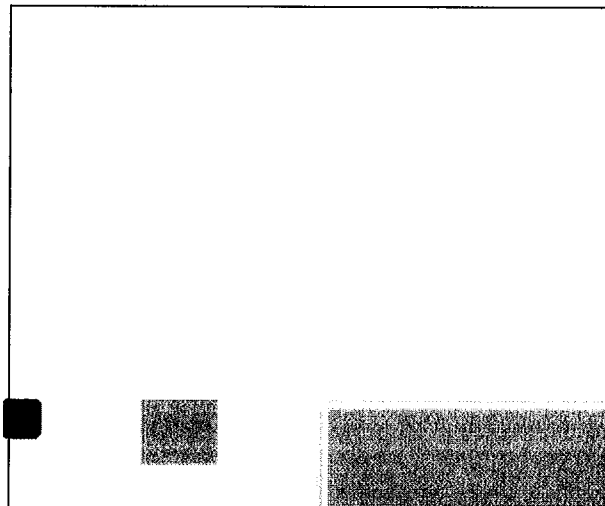
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"food insecure" and would go hungry otherwise. On Wednesday, volunteers at Second Harvest put these packages together. / Glenn Beil

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