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Child hunger demands an immediate response

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By [DeWayne Wells](#)
[Special to the Michigan Citizen](#)

Poverty and continued economic instability are threatening the success of a generation of our region's children. In Michigan, child poverty has reached 23.2 percent, having trended upward over the past nine years. Hunger, a direct consequence of poverty, has also risen. One in four children in southeast Michigan are at risk of not having enough nutritious food on a regular basis. All signs indicate the situation for children in Michigan is not likely to improve in the near term, meaning child hunger will remain a serious problem for several years to come.

Decades of research shows hunger has immediate effects on young children and also puts their futures at risk. Insufficient nutrition leaves children vulnerable to illness and weakens their immune systems. Children who don't eat enough are more likely to experience irritability, fatigue and difficulty concentrating, and are more likely to fall behind and stay behind in their academic development compared to their better-nourished peers. Even short spells of malnutrition can have detrimental, long-term effects on the cognitive development of children during the critical early childhood years.

We hear it every day from teachers, parents, school principals and social workers: Too many children are not getting enough to eat. Children come to school hungry and spend holiday breaks and summers wondering when they will get their next meal. Efforts like the National School Lunch Programs and the Summer Food Service Program help, but they are not enough.

In the face of this crisis, Gleaners has been aggressively pursuing solutions to make a larger impact on child hunger. In our last fiscal year alone, through programs like BackPack, Smart Bites and school-based mobile pantries, Gleaners reached 261,000 children with food and nutrition education — three times more than in the previous year. During the summer months alone, when children are most vulnerable to hunger, Gleaners delivered 6 million meals to children — a two million meal increase over the previous summer.

Gleaners is also partnering with local and national organizations on long-term solutions to child hunger. We are part of Michigan No Kid Hungry, an initiative of Share Our Strength (a national child hunger organization), the United Way for Southeastern Michigan and the office of Gov. Rick Snyder. Gleaners is reaching low-income families with children through Cooking Matters, a program of Share our Strength that Gleaners administers locally. Cooking Matters equips families with knowledge and skills to shop for and prepare healthful foods on limited budgets. The program has been shown to lead to sustainable lifestyle changes that can make a positive impact on health and household budgets.

As long as our region's children remain vulnerable, we will continue to prioritize reaching them with food and nutrition education. For example, to mark the 20th anniversary of our Women's Power Breakfast this April, Gleaners has a goal to raise 2 million meals — or \$680,000 — to fund our child food distribution programs between now and the end of the school year. You can learn more about this effort at www.womenspowerbreakfast.org.

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Child hunger and poverty are problems that can't wait. We must act now to make sure today's children get the nourishment they need to be healthy and thrive now and in the future.

DeWayne Wells is president of Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan. He is also a member of the Detroit Food Policy Council.

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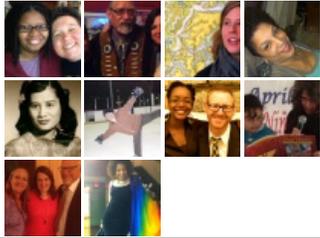
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