

Beacon Hill Byline – By Mary Rogeness

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Childhood hunger: Some food for thought

The Legislative Breakfast is one of Friday's facts of life for Massachusetts lawmakers. House sessions are rarely scheduled on Fridays, so companies and organizations plan meetings on those days to educate us. Typically, the first meeting of the day serves breakfast. Last Friday, the western Mass. legislators started the day in Northampton, where 30 interested organizations sponsored a breakfast on childhood hunger.

We learned that although the economic recession has increased our nutritional needs, our state is leading the nation in responding to childhood hunger. There is a good-news, bad-news situation regarding hunger in the nation. Society's reponse to the situation has improved, but so has the number of those in need. When Gov. Weld signed the Childhood Hunger Relief Act last month, Massachusetts became the first state to achieve the following objectives: 100 percent funding of WIC, school breakfast programs, summer meal programs for children and outreach to increase the use of food stamps.

A new mother spoke at the breakfast of her experiences with the WIC program (Women, Infants and Children). Her husband is underemployed, and she lost her job last year when she was pregnant. Today her young son is getting a healthy start, thanks to WIC. That federal program provides nutritional counseling and vouchers for wholesome food items for pregnant women, mothers and children. As a button on her sweater stated, "WIC works."

A kindergarten teacher told the meeting about a certain child in her classroom who is now, after six months of regular meals at school, ready to begin learning. Frequent illness, absences and inattention were all symptoms of his hunger. More than one fourth of her Amherst kindergartners receive meals at school, and good nutrition may be doing as much for their health and education as medical and educational programs. Massachusetts is also enlarging its summertime meal program, and meals are available for children in targeted neighborhoods.

The final method of fighting hunger is community outreach. The newly unemployed, the elderly and the working poor might not know they qualify for food stamps, so staffers are constantly advocating for the program. Maternity wards, schools and social service offices all search for people in need.

We left the meeting impressed by the commitment of the professionals and volunteers who are working to feed the hungry. We were enriched by new information, and instilled with a heightened sensitivity that will be called on when we are asked to authorize funds in next year's budget to keep the work against childhood hunger on track.

END NOTES: After the breakfast meeting I asked the Longmeadow School Department about the town's lunch program. We do not offer breakfast. Ninety students receive free school lunches, a 50 percent increase from two years ago. Parents are informed of the program each year, and they can apply through the school principal at any time. The benefit can be significant to a family in difficulty, and all costs are borne by the federal government. In case you are wondering, the sponsors did not spend their money on a lavish meal for us lawmakers. It was coffee and Danish.