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Emily opens her lunch kit quietly, hoping none of her classmates in the busy Grade 6 classroom will notice the kit is almost empty, as usual.

As unlikely as it sounds, this scene is played out many times daily in prosperous Alberta.

A 2003 survey in the Lethbridge area found that about 11 per cent of the students polled said they did not have enough to eat in the previous three weeks most of the time. About four per cent said they were hungry because their families didn't have enough money to buy food.

The Chinook Health Region polled 4,768 children between grades 4 and 12.

Research has shown that children who suffer from hunger struggle to pay attention in school, have difficulty staying healthy and are more likely to suffer from behavioural or social dysfunction.

Unfortunately, many Albertans suffer from hunger, or "food insecurity," as some people describe it.

Growing Food Security in Alberta (GFSA), a project funded in part by Health Canada, says food security exists when "people at all times can acquire safe, nutritionally adequate and personally acceptable foods in a manner that maintains human dignity."

The growing number of food banks in the province is evidence that hunger is a problem for many. In March 2005, Alberta food banks helped 45,481 people, according to a survey by the Canadian Association of Food Banks.

The good news is that small steps are being taken to find solutions. The federal government started funding the GFSA project in 2002 on the recommendation of provincial nutritionists who have had growing concerns about the issue for a decade.

"Food insecurity has so much breadth and depth," says project co-ordinator Susan Roberts.



SANDY PORTER PHOTO, PORTER RANCHES, DUFFIELD, ALTA.

It's a rich province with rich soil, yet some of its residents still go hungry.

"It isn't the sole responsibility of any level of government, and no major organization has taken it on. Our role is to draw awareness to this issue and to help implement solutions."

GFSA is backed by various organizations besides the federal government, including a provincial group of nutritionists and a federal dietitians group.

Many people are surprised to hear hunger is such a significant issue here.

Brenda Yamkowy, a licensed practical nurse and program co-ordinator for Babies' Best Start, a federally funded prenatal nutrition program, often sees the challenges Alberta mothers face in getting enough nutritious food.

"People move to our community

near Grande Prairie, which is in the middle of a boom, and find jobs but cannot find affordable housing," she says. "Many of them are what I would classify as the working poor. All their money goes to lodging, vehicles, etc. and little is left over for food."

Yamkowy says she has seen young mothers "at their very lowest" when they don't have money for the basics.

"We need to make the general public aware that these people are not 'bums,' but people like you and me and they deserve to have adequate food just as much as anyone else. We all need to play a role in solving the problem of food insecurity."

For information on Growing Food Security in Alberta, visit www.foodsecurityalberta.ca or phone 780-987-2002, Ext. 1.

Getting involved

Here are some ways you can help reduce hunger in your community:

- Join the GFSA Network and keep informed about food security projects in Alberta. Through the network, you can participate in discussion forums and help raise awareness.
- Get involved with a school council and help set up a breakfast or lunch program for students.
- Donate your time to a food bank, a school lunch program, soup kitchen, collective kitchen or similar organization.
- When you donate to the food bank, consider canned fruits and vegetables or light peanut butter. Food bank users sometimes struggle to get enough fruits, vegetables and good protein.
- Join a community garden, collective kitchen or food box program. The programs use volunteers to distribute boxes of fruit and vegetables to people for a relatively low price.
- Teach a course on home preserving, gardening or meal preparation at your local community centre or church.
- Try to buy food locally at farmers markets and other places to support local producers and to ensure you are getting the balanced nutrition of fresh fruits and vegetables in your diet.
- Let your MLA know you are concerned.