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By Stephen P. LeDuc, Guest columnist

GHS

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LeDuc: Give thanks by sharing the bounty

As the colorful autumn leaves quickly fall from their trees and the cold winter breezes slowly re-introduce themselves, we once again find ourselves immersed in the holiday season. We gather with friends and family to celebrate the end of the year and prepare ourselves for the long winter ahead.

Winter can be a very challenging time for anyone who is less fortunate with limited resources, and many find themselves close to being homeless or struggling to keep heat on in the face of rising fuel costs. For too many individuals and families, this results in serious difficulties putting food on the table.

For many residents of this great Commonwealth of ours, getting enough food can be a real struggle. Tragically, hunger affects a large number of children in Massachusetts. The cost of food is at a 10-year high and fuel costs are at an all-time high. For many, there is simply not enough money to pay for food, housing and heat. For these families, food is the one piece of the family budget that can be cut and children's nutrition needs do not get met.

This week, many of us in the legislature attended a presentation on child hunger given by Dr. Deborah Frank from the Boston University Medical Center. She described the effects of child hunger she sees everyday at the Grow Clinic. She also told us the story of a woman who recently brought her children in for a checkup. The children were well-cared for, but underfed. The baby showed signs of malnutrition. When Dr. Frank examined the 5-year old, the child looked up at her and said, "My daddy is in Iraq."

It turns out that this woman is herself an Iraq veteran and her husband is currently deployed in Iraq. The simple fact is that, with her husband on deployment she cannot afford to adequately feed her family.

Many of us have perhaps have grown accustomed to believing that the less fortunate among us are taken care of through food stamps, fuel assistance or subsidized housing. The reality is a little different.

Many families in Massachusetts are homeless and many more struggle to keep a roof over their head, food on their table and heat in the winter. Approximately 10 percent of Massachusetts residents live below the poverty rate and approximately half a million

children are below 200 percent of poverty rate. Only 17 percent of all families who are eligible for fuel assistance receive assistance.

Any family that qualifies for food stamps can get them. However, the maximum food stamp allowance is \$1.40 per person per meal. No matter how frugal you are you cannot provide adequate nutrition to a growing child for \$1.40 per meal.

The effects of hunger on children, particularly young children, are profound. A child's brain develops more in the first three years of life than it will at any other time. Without the proper nutrition, a child's brain will develop far less quickly than it should. Without the proper nutrition a child is also far more susceptible to infections and illnesses that can result in avoidable hospital stays.

Children with enough healthy food to eat grow up stronger, healthier and better able to succeed in school. Relatively small investments in food, housing and heating assistance can change a child's life forever.

These small investments also yield tremendous returns in lower health-care costs as well as lower costs for special education and other services. When we are hungry, perhaps because we were in a meeting and skipped lunch or left the house without our wallet or for whatever reason, we tend to lose focus, lack energy and perform less well. This is even more true for a child who is hungry, especially a child who is frequently hungry.

School becomes a real challenge, moodiness or aggression may begin to become a problem. For this child the odds of succeeding become very steep indeed.

There are steps that we can take in the legislature and steps that we have taken. The Rental Assistance for Families in Transition program has kept thousands of families in their homes or enabled them to transition into stable permanent housing. Fully funding the Food Stamp Program and WIC helps to put food on the table for many struggling families. The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program helps many struggling families pay ever higher heating bills. We need to support these efforts and many more.

Thanksgiving is a day when we share the bounty of our table with those we love. We give thanks for friends and family and the many blessings of our lives. It is also a time when we may reflect on those less fortunate. It is a time when we should donate to our local food pantry or write a check to a local charity to provide a meal to a person or family in need. It is a time to reflect on our many blessings and to share those blessings with others.

I hope that we can all make a commitment to mark our calendars for three, six or nine months to make another donation when pantry cupboards are low and in desperate need of replenishment.

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