

## California pediatrician leads effort to tackle food insecurity

by **Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff** • Associate Editor

In the 30-plus years he practiced pediatrics, Eric Handler, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, never thought to ask if his patients had enough to eat. Now working as health officer of Orange County, Calif., Dr. Handler



Dr. Handler

has a new outlook after learning the county ranks in the Top 10 in the nation for food insecurity, despite its affluence.

“To me, it needs to be on the radar because in Orange County, for example, one in five children face food insecurity where they don’t know where their next meal is going to come from,” said Dr. Handler. “And 300,000 to 400,000 people every year face food insecurity in Orange County.”

The Waste Not O.C. Coalition, a public-private partnership, was formed to “reduce hunger and solid waste by facilitating the donation of wholesome surplus food.” The campaign was founded in 2012 by Dr. Handler and Orange County Food Bank CEO Mark Lowry. When Dr. Handler learned Lowry had inadequate food supplies, he posed the question, “If we were able to capture food that is wasted and direct it to people in need, could we end hunger in Orange County?”

Lowry said yes, and the campaign took off.

Among the challenges is convincing businesses such as restaurants to donate prepared food normally thrown away. Volunteers explain how the federal Good Samaritan rule exempts donors from liability as long as food is correctly prepared.

Identifying everyone who needs better access to food is a key focus. Dr. Handler, a member of the coalition’s steering committee, is working with AAP California Chapter 4 to advocate that pediatricians ask two questions of families to assess food insecurity and offer resources, a concept highlighted in a study in *Pediatrics* (2010;126:e26-e32). The

study was forwarded to Dr. Handler by Phyllis E. Agran, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, the chapter’s past president.

As suggested in the article, Dr. Handler says clinicians can ask parents if they agree with the following:

1. Within the past 12 months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.
2. Within the past 12 months, the food we bought just didn’t last and we didn’t have the money to get more.

Those who answer yes can find a local food pantry shown on an interactive Google map of all the pantries in the county. The map (<http://www.wastenotoc.org>) is easily replicated by other communities, Dr. Handler said. (Go to [www.google.com/earth/outreach/tutorials/custommaps.html#prereq](http://www.google.com/earth/outreach/tutorials/custommaps.html#prereq).)

Dr. Agran, a pediatric gastroenterologist, supports the concept of pediatricians asking families about food insecurity when appropriate and has similar discussions with some parents whose child needs a costly specialized formula. However, demographics should be taken into account, she said. “As pediatricians, we use our discretion. ... We don’t ask every patient every question.”

Pediatricians should be aware of the problems of food insecurity, know what tools are available — including federal resources — and be able to provide them to families, said Dr. Agran. She would like to see pediatricians advocating at the federal, state and local levels “to ensure that all of our children and their families are food secure.”



Dr. Agran