



THE OFFICIAL NEWSMAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

AAP News

Anti-hunger advocate shares some food for thought

by Carla Kemp, Senior Editor



Editor's note: For more coverage of the 2020 AAP Virtual National Conference & Exhibition, visit <https://www.aappublications.org/news/2020/08/21/nationalconference2020>.

Food insecurity no longer is a foreign term to most pediatricians. Yet, they may be unsure about what they can do to make a difference in the lives of those facing hunger.



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Kofi D. Essel, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, shares some advice and encouragement during a session titled "Food for Thought: Addressing Food Insecurity Through Policy and Practice," which can be accessed [via the virtual platform](#) through Jan. 31, 2021.

"Hunger is not a temporary emergency that may be cured with a limited supply of food," said Dr. Essel, a member of the AAP Section on Obesity. "Instead, hunger reflects a deeper, more profound systemic issue."



In general, households with children experience higher levels of food insecurity than households without children, he said. And the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation.

"During COVID-19 ... we have seen food insecurity rates in households with children more than double to approximately 30% of all households with children," said Dr. Essel, attending physician at Children's Health Center at Anacostia, Goldberg Center for Community Pediatric Health and director of Community/Urban Health Scholarly Concentration at The George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

"The most recent data (on food insecurity) for households with children, or more specifically adult respondents with children, reveals African American households at 38.3%, Hispanic households at 36.7% and White American households at 24.9%, further highlighting the role of systemic injustices and racism in the country and the role of COVID-19 in amplifying an already damaging disparity," Dr. Essel said.

During the session, Dr. Essel reviews AAP efforts to bring food insecurity to the forefront, including publication of the policy statement *Promoting Food Security for All Children* in 2015, followed by release of a [toolkit](#) for pediatricians in partnership with the Food Research & Action Center in 2017.

Dr. Essel said food insecurity is one of the most pervasive and damaging toxic stressors among families. He encourages pediatricians to screen all patients using tools such as the Hunger Vital Sign and intervene "with meaningful approaches that incorporate federal nutrition programs as the anchor to address food deprivation followed by emergency relief programs such as food banks/pantries and soup kitchens."

He also provides advocacy tips to enhance the health of families, neighborhoods and communities.

"As an anti-hunger advocate and passionate supporter of recognizing the role of food as a human right, I believe pediatricians will be encouraged by my brief, engaging and informative session," Dr. Essel said. "Pediatricians will leave feeling empowered to take up their mantle and continue to advocate in and out of the clinic to seamlessly integrate clinical and population health care using their voices to impact change."