

Food drives: Giving the gift of... ramen?

By Ruthi Solari 5:30 p.m. Nov. 19, 2014

Ramen, Coco Puffs and sugary juices: These are just a few of the food-like items that too often fill sparse shelves at food pantries nationwide.

With the holiday season comes the food drive season. Boxes and barrels fill up as well-meaning individuals grab items from the back of their pantries (often expired or undesired) or purchase cheap items with the goal of feeding the hungry. Unfortunately, these good intentions and acts of charity often culminate in a food drive with barrels filled with highly processed items loaded with salt, sugar, high fructose corn syrup and trans fats.

When it comes to hunger relief, filling empty stomachs with whatever unhealthy food is available isn't truly the solution.

Today, nearly 50 million Americans, including 12 million children, lack regular access to food. When forced to choose between paying for utilities or for food, 79 percent report buying cheap, unhealthy food so they have something to feed their family — this means the families are “food insecure.” Much of the supplemental food provided by food pantries is of the same meager nutritional quality. Regular consumption of unhealthy food, and inadequate access to healthy food, inevitably results in chronic obesity and disease. Considering this undeniable link between food insecurity and poor health, the current system of hunger relief is not up to par.

We need to transform local food drives, national food banks and global humanitarian aid into providers of nutrient dense nonperishable foods. Organizations need to work together to educate the community about the health benefits of eating nutrient dense foods, supporting food banks and food pantries in providing healthy food to those in need. The impact of these actions will simultaneously address the epidemics of hunger, malnutrition, obesity and chronic disease throughout our community.

Imagine if food drive barrels overflowed with whole grains, lean proteins, low-sodium soup, beans, nuts and legumes. When compared to barrels full of ramen noodles, cake mix and macaroni, this is a vast improvement.

Healthy food drives are only a small piece of the puzzle. Widespread policies are needed within the hunger relief system guaranteeing anywhere food is distributed for free, the food is nutrient dense and promoting health.

In recent years, food banks have recognized the rise in obesity and diet-related diseases among food insecure individuals and are taking steps to play their part in the solution. A study by the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity interviewed 20 food banks throughout the U.S. about their current nutrition policies and practices. The study identified while some food banks readily implemented policies to stop the distribution of junk food such as soda and candy, most were hesitant to make drastic changes that may reduce the total amount of food distributed.

As long as food banks report success relative to total number of pounds distributed, important nutrition and food sourcing policies will remain scarce. Success should be based on the overall nutritional quality of food served to the community.

Simple swaps such as low-sodium black beans instead of refried beans, broth-based soups instead of cream-based soups, a canister of rolled oats instead of prepackaged sweetened oatmeal are examples of getting more nutrients for the same, and sometimes cheaper, price as the less nutritious alternative. Food banks can use their purchasing power to increase the availability of healthy non-perishables.

Feeding America San Diego Food Bank alone serves over 437,000 children, families and seniors each year. Food assistance programs need to provide food that promotes health to individuals getting back on their feet. Food offerings should be balanced with whole grains, proteins, healthy fats, fruits and vegetables, free of chemicals and additives, and able to accommodate special dietary needs. In doing so, food pantries will help people get healthier instead of making them sicker.

The shift from hunger relief to health promotion is underway. Organizations such as SuperFood Drive enable individuals like you to donate healthy food in order to help improve the health of our neighbors in need. This holiday season, reference SuperFood Drive's healthy shopping list for ideas on affordable, nutritious nonperishables. Think of the individual receiving your food and give something you would be grateful to find in your own pantry.

Solari is founder and executive director of SuperFood Drive. Information: www.superfooddrive.org

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