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Multnomah County

Oregon's First Lady declares new war on poverty, child hunger

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From left: Dan Saltzman, Deborah Kafoury, Loretta Smith, Jeff Cogen, Cylvia Hayes, Judy Shiprack, Diane McKeel, Patty Whitney-Wise and Susannah Morgan at the briefing on childhood hunger.



Oregon Food Bank Executive Director Susannah Morgan wears a padlock on a chain that someone once cut from a food bank dumpster to access the food inside.



From left: Patty Whitney-Wise; Oregon First Lady Cylvia Hayes; and County Commissioners Judy Shiprack and Diane McKeel speak after a briefing on child hunger.

First Lady [Cylvia Hayes](#) declared a new war on poverty Tuesday, announcing details of a [prosperity plan](#) to tackle the state's alarming rate of hunger.

Oregon has one of the highest rates of child hunger in the nation. In response, Hayes said, [Gov. John Kitzhaber](#) is rolling out a multi-pronged plan in April.

Among the plan's pieces is bringing the microloan program [Kiva](#) to Oregon. Kiva is a microfinance program usually aimed at getting tiny loans to women in undeveloped countries. But Hayes and other emergency food bank experts told the [Multnomah County Board of Commissioners](#) that there is "appalling" need here.

One in five Oregon children does not get enough to eat, Hayes said.

"These aren't just statistics, these are our neighbors," she said. "When you go past any schoolyard at recess - in all but the most affluent districts - you will see the kids who do not get enough to eat. It is completely unacceptable."

The First Lady spoke at a briefing Feb. 11 requested by Commissioners [Deborah Kafoury](#) and [Diane McKeel](#). She was joined by [Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman](#), of the Children's Levy, and [Patty Whitney-Wise](#), executive director of the [Oregon Hunger Task Force and Partners for a Hunger Free Oregon](#) and [Susannah Morgan](#), executive director of the [Oregon Food Bank](#).

Baby Boomers preside over dramatic rise in hunger

Whitney-Wise said the dramatic rise in hunger has occurred since the late 1970s. Prior to that, she said, "we had a minimum wage to lift families above the poverty level."

Today, parents can work full-time but because of the minimum wage, still do not earn enough. She noted that schools in the late 1970s also had counselors, nurses and smaller class sizes.

"We invested in my generation," Whitney-Wise said. "And it paid off."

Today she said, her generation is raising a generation of great need. A shocking number of children in Multnomah County come from homes with such low incomes they qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

In the David Douglas school district, 77 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In Parkrose, that number is 76 percent; Reynolds, 72 percent; Centennial, 68 percent; Gresham, 49 percent and Portland Public, 45 percent.

Whitney-Wise paraphrased a remark from the documentary on hunger, "A Place at the Table."

"If another country were doing this to our kids we would be at war with them," Whitney-Wise said.

Morgan, the Oregon Food Bank executive director, said hungry children are more likely to be sick, absent, distracted and less likely to graduate from high school.

"Children who are hungry are more likely to grow up to be frequently ill, less-productive members of society," Morgan said. "We curse them as children if we don't take efforts now."

She said Oregon Food Bank is doing what it and 945 partner agencies can, distributing 81 million pounds of food in more than 1 million food boxes statewide. In Multnomah County, the Food Bank is also innovating by:

Partnering with Multnomah County [SUN school-based pantries](#) to serve more than 500 families a month the last two years "taking food to where children are."

Supplementing food boxes with community baskets that emphasize produce.

Encouraging food security screening in pediatrician offices to ensure that families who are struggling can be identified.

Morgan recounted the story of a food bank director in the U.S. Midwest who came to work one morning to find that someone had cut off the padlock on the agency's dumpster to get to the food inside. The food bank director, shocked by such desperation, kept the broken padlock with him for 25 years always to remind him how people feel when they're hungry. Last spring, as he lay gravely ill, the director sent Morgan, who was a friend, the broken padlock.

"I have it with me always," she said, touching half a padlock that hung from a necklace. "It says everything about why it is so important to the people of Multnomah County to do this work."

[Click here to view video of the Feb. 13 board briefing.](#)