

Santa Cruz County's hungry children

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Forty-one percent of children under 17 in Santa Cruz County are hungry or at risk of being hungry, says a report put together earlier this year.

That figure was released by members of the newly organized Campaign to End Childhood Hunger in a press conference in Watsonville yesterday. The campaign is made up of a number of local social services agencies and organizations,

county departments, peace organizations and a business.

Robert Garcia, the agency administrator for Food and Nutri-

■How one family struggles to keep food on the table; page 11.

tion Services, said campaign members arrived at the figure by calculating how many children are eligible for the Women, Infants and Children program and for the free and reduced school-lunch program in local

schools. The numbers were provided by WIC and the schools based on income information on clients and potential clients.

WIC estimates there are 10,747 children eligible for the program. Because there's a limit to how many clients WIC can serve, only 35 percent of those are in the food supplement program. The schools reported 12,046 students eligible for the lunch program; 95 percent of those are in the program. Those figures are 41 per-

cent of the total number of children under 17 in the county — 54,704, according to the 1991 census.

If the calculations are correct, the county figures are worse than the state and national average of 25 percent of children going hungry or at risk of going hungry.

It's also possible, Garcia said, that the county numbers may actually be higher, since some people who fit the income guidelines may not have signed up

for either program.

Three of those 22,793 hungry children are Elizabeth Farias'. Farias, who was recently cut off from the WIC program to make way for clients deemed more needy, was one of the people who spoke at the press conference yesterday. Holding one of her children, Farias stepped up to the microphone, but lost her composure and was unable to speak for several moments.

"When it comes to the end of the month, I sometimes don't

have food for my children," she said, "At times, I've had to go through the children's piggy banks to get what I need (to feed them)."

Farias said Gov. Wilson's cuts to AFDC have made things harder.

"Believe me, I can feel it," she said. "There are other people that I know who are worse off than me."

Other speakers talked about

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Public view the allegations of sexual abuse

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the implications of the problem.

Children who don't get enough to eat are at risk for a number of diseases as well as developmental problems, said County Health Officer Dr. Ira Lubell.

Kristin Cozad, a Pajaro Valley Unified School District trustee, said the district can supply classrooms, supplies and staff, but if children aren't getting enough to eat, they aren't going to be able to learn.

Sister Susan Olsen, of Pajaro Valley Shelter Services, said she has seen instances in which children blame themselves for the financial problems the family is having.

"We need to reduce that stress," she said.

Garcia said the campaign believes there are enough resources available to solve the problem. With the exception of the WIC program, other food programs that exist in the county — food stamps, summer lunch programs and school meals programs — don't have a limit on the number of people they can serve.

What needs to happen, he said, is to make sure all the agencies serving poor people work together to increase enrollment in those programs.

As an example, not all the schools have both breakfast and lunch programs. One of the things the campaign is planning to do is work with the various school districts to find out why and to try to get those programs

set up.

Michael Walker, coordinator of the campaign, said increasing public awareness of the problem is the campaign's first goal. Other activities include developing new emergency food pantries, working on eliminating barriers to programs such as food stamps, sensitivity training for workers for various programs and trying to obtain more funds.

The campaign is calling for individuals, businesses and organizations to volunteer time or make donations toward the various activities they have planned. One business, New Leaf Community Market in Santa Cruz, has offered to match donations of up to \$100 to the campaign.

Further information on the campaign is available by calling 688-8840, ext. 234.