
OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

Hungry on Long Island need all of us

Hunger doesn't always look the way we expect it to. It looks like a senior on a fixed income choosing between groceries and prescription medication. It looks like a veteran who served this country and now struggles to keep the refrigerator stocked. It looks like a working parent whose paycheck stretches less and less each month. And on Long Island, it is far more common than many may realize.

September is Hunger Action Month, a national call to recognize and address the food insecurity crisis affecting millions of Americans. On Long Island, that call has never been more urgent.

In 2023, one in 12 Long Islanders experienced food insecurity, up from one in 13 the year before. That's an increase of more than seven percent in a single year. These aren't just statistics. They represent missed meals for children who can't concentrate in school, seniors who ration medication to afford dinner, and families that are one unexpected expense away from a food crisis.

This is what drives the work of organizations like Island Harvest Food Bank. Founded in 1992 with one woman, one car, and a simple but powerful idea that surplus food could be rescued and used to nourish neighbors in need, Island Harvest has grown into one of Long Island's leading hunger-relief organizations. Today, we serve as a lifeline for children, seniors, veterans, and working families across the region.

Our approach is holistic. We recognize that ending hunger requires more than food distribution alone. That's why we pair food collection with hunger awareness, nutrition education, case management, and long-term workforce development through programs like the Healthy Harvest Farm and Workforce Skills Development Institute. We're not just helping people get through today. We're helping them build lasting stability for tomorrow.

That commitment is especially visible through Operation: HOPE, our program dedicated to veterans and active-duty military families. Built on a veteran-serving-veteran model, the program connects former service members with peer support, food assistance, and access to essential resources. One veteran who came to the program after struggling to transition back to civilian life told us he never expected to need help putting food on the table after serving his country. Through Operation: HOPE, he found not only nutritious food for his family but a community that understood his challenges and helped him regain stability. Stories like his remind us that hunger can affect anyone, including those who have given so much in service to our nation. Today, Operation: HOPE serves roughly 1,000 veterans each month and distributes more than 200,000 pounds of nutritious food annually.

But we cannot close this gap alone.

Nonprofits can build infrastructure, train volunteers, and design programs, but addressing hunger at the scale it demands requires support from every corner of our community. Corporate partners play an essential role through direct funding, employee volunteer programs, and long-term investments that allow organizations like Island Harvest to expand services and reach more families.

Companies like PMI U.S., JPMorgan Chase and PSEG Long Island, National Grid and FourLeaf Federal Credit Union have demonstrated how corporate engagement can strengthen local communities. Their support helps fund the trucks, warehouses, staff, and programs that make hunger relief possible. But corporations are only part of the solution.

This Hunger Action Month, we're also calling on small businesses, restaurants, community groups, and individual Long Islanders to join the effort. Restaurants and food retailers can help reduce waste by donating safe surplus food. Small businesses can sponsor food drives or encourage employee volunteerism. Community members can sort food in our warehouse, help distribute meals at mobile pantries, support nutrition education programs, volunteer on our farm, or make a financial contribution of any size. Every action matters, and every contribution helps us reach more neighbors in need.

Every community is ultimately judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. On Long Island, that means the senior deciding between rent and groceries, the veteran adjusting to life after service, and the family working hard but still falling short. Food insecurity numbers are moving in the wrong direction, but that trajectory can change.

This Hunger Action Month, we invite every Long Islander to be part of the solution. Whether you're a major corporation, a local business owner, a restaurant operator, or an individual looking to give back, there is a role for you to play. Donate food or funds. Volunteer. Partner with us. Together, we can help ensure that no Long Islander goes hungry.

