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GUEST OPINION: Navarrette is wrong about food stamps, farmers markets



By JO WEBER

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Ruben Navarrette, in his column on Monday ("Where the welfare state meets the nanny state," Page A10), opposes the state bill requiring food stamp acceptance in farmers markets primarily on the assumption that making produce purchases inconvenient to food stamp recipients will inspire people to stop using them. He stated: "If people in California or another state are so put off by not being able to shop at farmers markets, they might decide that they don't like being on food stamps after all."

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- NAVARRETTE: Where the welfare state meets the nanny state

He fails to see the bigger picture.

Navarrette wrote: "In these dire economic times, many Californians worry about losing their jobs,

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homes or health insurance.”

In fact, in these dire economic times, many Californians worry about much more than losing their jobs, homes or health insurance. They also worry about not being able to feed their children.

Food stamp applications in Sonoma County have increased nearly 70 percent over the past two years. This is not a result of a dependency “handed down from one generation to another” — it is a direct result of the same dire economic times Navarrette mentions.

Navarrette might be surprised to discover that the average food stamp recipient looks an awful lot like your neighbor. That’s because 1 in 9 people in Sonoma County are living in circumstances that qualify them for food stamps — some who in better economic times would never have expected to need them. Fifty-five percent of the foods stamp recipients in Sonoma County are children. And, according to the USDA Office of Research and Analysis, 40 percent of food stamp households have at least one working family member.

Food stamp recipients look like our neighbors because they are our neighbors.

Although the picture of overweight families in poverty seems counter-intuitive, the sad fact is that food insecurity in the United States does lead to obesity, diabetes and a host of other serious health issues. The Sonoma County Health Services Department is currently mapping the “food deserts” in our area — low-income neighborhoods that don’t have easy access to full-service grocery stores. The filling, but low-nutrition, foods that are readily available in low-income neighborhoods contribute to the paradox of overweight and poorly nourished families.

Making more nutritious food like fresh fruits and vegetables available — even convenient — to the children of struggling families has profound and positive effects, not only for the health of the families themselves but for our community.

Studies show that stable access to healthy food increases children’s ability to succeed in school. The better children do in school the more likely they are to graduate from high school, attend college and support their own families. A partnership between food stamps and farmers markets is not about fostering dependency; it’s about ensuring better health for all of California’s children.

The food stamp program is also a federally funded economic stimulus, creating an economic boost that ripples throughout the local economy. By generating business at local grocery stores (and farmers markets), food stamp benefits trigger labor and production demand, increasing household income and generating additional spending in Sonoma County.

In fact, studies show that every \$5 in food stamp benefits brought into Sonoma County generates \$9.20 in total local spending. The farmers in our community may even be grateful for the additional revenue.

Food stamps are a community safety net. Making fresh produce inconvenient for food stamp families does little but tear a hole in an already frayed safety net.

*Jo Weber is director of the Sonoma County Department of Human Services.*

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