

# Don't neglect the true food fraud victims — hungry kids

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More than 300,000 kids are hungry in Minnesota. We cannot fail them again.

**By Rob Williams**

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The alleged \$250 million fraud by Feeding Our Future through a federally funded food program has been widely covered in the media. This crime is appalling for both our community and the country at large, but the most important victims are getting lost in the story.

Taxpayers often have been cast as the primary victims in this crime. I have heard people talk about their "hard-earned dollars being stolen" and how "taxpayers are carrying the burden of this crime." I have heard people blame Democrats. I have heard people blame Republicans. I have heard people blame the courts, the FBI and the list goes on.

What I have heard almost nothing about are the true victims: hungry kids.

Taxpayers have every right to be angry. But the victims we should be most focused on are the hungry kids in Minnesota. It's not just about the physical pain of hunger, it's that a lack of nutrition has a significant negative impact on the kids' physical development, academic

performance, behavior, attendance, attentiveness and self-esteem. There are kids who are without desperately needed food as a result of this crime, and they may suffer more as a result of the public backlash.

Immediately following the news reports of the Feeding Our Future fraud, I began hearing people say, "Where are these hungry kids?" I'm hearing more people in our community openly doubt that child hunger even exists in Minnesota.

Truth is, more than 300,000 Minnesota kids face empty kitchen cupboards at home, and Feeding Our Future's fraud hurt them more than anyone else. Kids experiencing food insecurity live in urban, suburban and rural areas. They live in your city. They go to your kids' school. They are not always easy to spot just by looking. But I promise you they are there. I have seen them, as the president and founder of Every Meal, a nonprofit focused on fighting child hunger.

Legitimate organizations actually doing the hard work to feed these kids are, understandably, facing increased scrutiny and skepticism. These organizations now have to spend time and money to build back trust that they never betrayed, thus facing an even steeper uphill climb to generate critical resources to serve hungry kids. Every Meal, which provides food directly to hungry Minnesota kids without using government funding, has even been publicly described as "shady" by uninformed members of the media simply because we provide food to kids on the weekend.

But the victims are not the organizations who serve the kids; the victims are the kids we aim to serve.

The \$250 million that was allegedly stolen could have helped feed hungry Minnesota kids. At Every Meal, that money could have funded our Weekend Meal Program in every single one of the nearly 2,000 schools in the state — for eight years! Instead, we are struggling to meet the 34% increase in need for our Weekend Meal Program. That's 2,476 more Minnesota kids who have raised their hand to say that there isn't enough food at home on the weekends — a staggering increase that I haven't seen in the 12 years I have been doing this work.

If you are as outraged about this fraud as I am, I encourage you to volunteer or donate to an organization in your community that helps feed kids. Hungry children are suffering, and because of this crime, they will likely suffer more. Let's not ignore them any longer.

*Rob Williams is the founder of Every Meal, a Roseville-based nonprofit.  
([www.everymeal.org](http://www.everymeal.org))*