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Lawmakers have eyes opened to hunger problems

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Special To The Times

Not too long ago, Cindy Santamaria faced a daily survival question: Feed herself and her young children or save money to try to meet rent.

"Sometimes I paid rent," said Santamaria, an Essex County resident who spoke at a roundtable discussion about hunger in New Jersey on Monday at The College of New Jersey. "At times I had to make choices. Sometimes I paid rent ... and sometimes I paid for food and fell behind in rent."

Santamaria, who fell into poverty several years ago and took advantage of the benefits of food stamps, Medicaid and transportation assistance, only recently became self-sufficient. Today she mentors others who are struggling to make ends meet. "Life is still a challenge for me, but it is so much better than it was."

Santamaria and others like her gave names and faces to the real problem of hunger.

The discussion, which was sponsored by the New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition and hosted by [TCNJ](#), provided elected officials with a bleak assessment of hunger in the state. In attendance were Rep. Rush Holt, D-Hopewell Township, and Rep. Frank Pallone, D-Long Branch.

Despite New Jersey's rank as the wealthiest state in the nation, hunger is a growing problem, according to officials who spoke at the forum. The statistics provided at the forum by the Anti-Hunger Coalition are nothing short of staggering:

The number of hungry people in the state would fill the Meadowlands Stadium in East Rutherford 9.4 times.

Six regional food banks in the state serve 734,000 low-income people per month.

Half of those served in the food banks are children and elderly.

"I know that you look at numbers and statistics," said Brenda Camp, a Trenton resident who has sought help from food pantries and soup kitchens in Mercer County. "But you never know hunger until you experience it."

There was some optimism expressed, however. "It is not an insurmountable problem; it's a problem we have to choose to surmount," said Adele LaTourette, director of the Statewide Emergency Food and Anti-Hunger Network.

Pallone said that some of what was discussed at the roundtable was news to him. "I really do believe that most members of Congress are not that aware of the problem," Pallone said. "So many of us are fortunate to have a lot of food and we don't realize that" many people don't have enough food.

The forum was co-sponsored by the Hispanic Directors Association, the Black Ministers Council and the [Bonner Center](#) and Program in Leadership and Public Affairs at [TCNJ](#).

The Rev. Bruce Davidson, who moderated the roundtable discussion and chairs the annual Statewide Conference on Poverty, urged those in attendance to speak out about hunger problems in the state. "Use your voice, know that your voice counts and we can make a difference."

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