

# Michelle Orge: Fear of immigration enforcement is deepening food insecurity in our community

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As the leader of southwestern Wisconsin's largest hunger-relief organization, my job is to ensure everyone in our community has enough nutritious food to thrive. When families are afraid to visit a food distribution event out of fear of increased immigration enforcement, I am profoundly concerned.

There are news stories about families in a Hispanic community in Milwaukee who are afraid to be racially profiled while visiting a food pantry, unlawfully detained, separated from their families, or worse. In Minnesota, ICE has been following volunteers as they deliver food, standing outside food pantry entrances, staging at or near pantry facilities, and, in at least one instance, detaining volunteers.

The fear that communities of color are experiencing is also happening right here in southwestern Wisconsin. We've heard from our partner pantries and other support organizations that some families of color – regardless of their immigration status or citizenship – are afraid to attend food distribution events.

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Every human being deserves to eat. That shouldn't be a controversial statement, and it certainly isn't a political one.

I've seen what it means when a family doesn't know where their next meal will come from. I've listened to guests share their stories of job loss, health scares, and working multiple jobs, yet still being unable to make ends meet. These stories have

come from neighbors from every background, identity, and walk of life; from those born halfway around the world and those born just down the road.

Hunger doesn't check someone's papers before it takes root in their home. It doesn't ask about someone's birthplace before it robs a parent of sleep because they are worried about feeding their children. What hunger does is stunt childhood development, strain health, sap potential, and deepen inequity.

At Second Harvest and our network of nearly 300 partners and programs, we believe that everyone deserves good food. With food insecurity rates higher than ever, especially in communities of color because of years of systemic racism, our network should be focusing on increasing access to both food and information. Instead, we are considering whether sharing information about where to access food support will increase risk for our neighbors.

Political rhetoric too often gets in the way of substantive progress on the immigration challenges we face. But when a mother goes to a pantry for the first time, she isn't there to debate policy. She's there because she's exhausted her other options. Because her rent went up. Because childcare costs are crushing her family budget. Because she wants her children to grow up strong. Those motivations are human, not partisan.

I urge you to contact your elected officials at all levels. Ask them to enact policies that prevent the strong-arm immigration enforcement tactics we have seen at places where people receive help meeting essential needs. It is time for our leaders to unite to eliminate hunger, not create barriers rooted in fear.

Our strength as a community is measured not by how we break people down, but by how we lift one another up. Ensuring that everyone, regardless of immigration status, identity, or background, has access to enough nutritious food isn't just the right thing to do — it's essential to building a healthy and strong community for all of us.

*Michelle Orge is president and executive director, Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin.*