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Hunger among children is a growing concern

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Grace Damio sees it all the time. The teenager who had so little to eat, she gained only 7 pounds in her pregnancy.

The mother who cheerfully managed two part-time jobs, but confessed one day to a caseworker that she and her five children had no food in the house and no money to buy any.

The welfare mother who talked responsibly at a workshop about preparing healthy snacks for her children, but afterward took Damio aside and said, "The last two weeks of the month, all we can think about is filling their stomachs."

Damio, coordinator of the maternal and child health unit at the Hispanic Health Council, and chairwoman of the Connecticut Anti-Hunger Coalition, spoke Tuesday at a hearing on childhood hunger before the Select Committee on Children in the Legislative Office Building.

Minutes before the hearing began, Damio and Laura Cohen, director of the anti-hunger coalition, presented the coalition's \$2 million legislative agenda, which includes proposals for a \$662,578 expansion in the school breakfast program; a \$560,000 expansion of a hunger outreach program which, if successful, would bring in \$2 million in federal money; and a \$450,000 increase for the State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which helps buy nutritious foods for emergency food programs.

Not included in the \$2 million tally is the coalition's proposal to create a \$535,000 contingency fund for the Women, Infants and Children supplemental food program, which would be used only if federal money fell short.

"The night the governor's budget came out I felt sad, depressed and ready to give up," said Cohen, director of the hunger division of the Connecticut Association for Human Services.

Cohen said the governor's two-year budget, if passed, would make the hunger problem worse by eliminating \$118,000 in state money for the Women, Infants and Children program; cutting money for the State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program by 5 percent; providing no cost-of-living increase for families in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program for the third and fourth years in a row; and providing inadequate funding for the school breakfast program.

During the hearing, speaker after speaker talked of the increasing numbers of hungry Connecticut residents and of the need to help children get adequate nutrition.

Dr. Martha F. Leonard of the Connecticut Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics said that "as a pediatrician with experience in the Third World of Haiti, as well as the Third World of New Haven" she is "concerned about the numbers of children in our Connecticut cities who go to bed hungry."

She said the human brain grows fastest during pregnancy.