King, Hancock: Hunger in Silicon Valley can be ended with community plan

By Lea King and Russell Hancock, Special to The Mercury News
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We are fortunate to live in one of the wealthiest, most technologically advanced and agriculturally abundant regions not only in the world but in history. Yet thousands of residents live with hunger daily -- not just the homeless but seniors, children, disabled residents and hard-working families. Our neighbors, our friends and our colleagues.

The high cost of living here, from housing to transportation, leaves many working families without enough money to buy food. Recent studies highlight this problem: One in six Bay Area residents is food insecure. Even with federal food stamps and the best efforts of donors of surplus food and of nonprofit food recovery and distribution organizations, more than 125 million additional meals are needed annually for the hungry in Silicon Valley. Today, nonprofits collect surplus food from restaurants and grocery stores and distribute it to organizations that care for the hungry. While admirable, the system is inefficient. There is plenty of surplus food, but collecting it from multiple sources and delivering it to those who need it is a significant challenge.

In addition, there is no coordinated effort to record and publish the availability of surplus prepared food, limiting contributors' ability to make a difference. We believe we can work together to harness what makes this region so incredible and do better.

The two nonprofits we lead have teamed up to convene organizations engaged in surplus food recovery and distribution. Our hope is to facilitate a new and collaborative way of alleviating hunger.

In conjunction with Santa Clara County, we are working to enhance the existing effort through a more productive donor, transportation and distribution system and by using innovative technologies.

Food waste in America hurts us all environmentally and financially: A recent national study found that the U.S. spends $218 billion a year growing, processing, transporting and disposing of food that is never eaten.

Congress is considering the Food Recovery Act to offer increased tax incentives for business donations and other support for people who are food insecure. This will help, but it will not solve the problem in the Bay Area. This challenge also requires standardized regional regulations for food handling safety and liability protections.

The 2015 Food Shift report commissioned by Santa Clara County titled, “Food Rescue Services, Barriers and Recommendations,” calls for new ideas to develop a system to reduce food waste and help food insecure families. We have taken that call to heart.

Joint Venture Silicon Valley, Silicon Valley Talent Partnership and the Recycling and Waste Reduction Commission of Santa Clara County hosted a Silicon Valley Food Recovery Forum in March. More than 100 people attended. The leaders agreed that a Silicon Valley Community Action Plan for surplus food recovery and distribution is a critical next step.

As directors of the working groups, we are collaborating with the community to develop that plan. We are educating businesses, trying to better understand existing and potential food-related policies and increase the availability of transportation and cold storage for food.
None of us feels right living in a place where genuine hunger persists alongside staggering wealth. We believe that the emotional, medical, ecological and environmental tolls of food insecurity can be averted.

Our Community Action Plan requires private, nonprofit and government organizations to work together. We believe that through these partnerships and recent technological innovation, we can develop new ways of reducing food waste and feed our hungry. If you are interested in joining this fight, please contact our organizations.

Lea King is executive director of Silicon Valley Talent Partnership. Russell Hancock is president and CEO of Joint Venture Silicon Valley. They wrote this article for this newspaper.