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Bush questions hunger report

By Jay Root
Star-Telegram Austin Bureau

AUSTIN -- Gov. George W. Bush challenged a recent federal report yesterday that said many Texans, including children, are going to bed hungry.

"I saw the report that children in Texas are going hungry. Where?" Bush said in an interview with the Star-Telegram. "I want to know the facts. I would like for the Department of Agriculture to show us who, where are they, and we'll respond."

"No children are going to go hungry in this state," said Bush, whose "leave no child behind" slogan has become a theme of his front-running Republican presidential campaign.

"We'll fix it and respond," he added. "You'd think the governor would have heard if there are pockets of hunger in Texas."

Anti-hunger activists and food pantry workers were startled at Bush's statements, saying emergency food distribution has risen sharply in Texas as soup kitchens strain to meet demand.

"I'm shocked he said that," said Sharon Hogan, executive director of the Metroplex Food Bank in Fort Worth, which distributes food to the needy and to food pantries. "There are massive amounts of people who go hungry. I could give you story after story."

The federal study that Bush challenged, a U.S. Department of Agriculture report titled "Measuring Food Security in the United States," says about 13 percent of Texas households were "food insecure," or unable to meet basic food needs at all times, between 1996 and 1998.

About 5 percent of Texas households suffered from hunger during the period, a rate surpassed only by Oregon, the report says. The study defines hunger as insufficient food intake causing an uneasy or painful sensation.

"This isn't a new report saying there's hungry kids in Texas. It's been true for years," said Celia Hagert, nutrition policy analyst at the Center for Public Policy Priorities, an advocacy group for low-income Texans. "It's ludicrous to say there's no hungry people in Texas. It's just ludicrous."

She said the report was carefully conducted using a detailed questionnaire. Bush, however, suggested that Texans who need food assistance are already receiving it.

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"We've got food banks," he said. "We've got food stamps. You know, there's a lot of people that are poor people, but I'd like to know who's going hungry in the state of Texas. That report just kind of flew out there."

Janet Cocciarelli, director of the Texas Association of Second Harvest Food Banks, a nonprofit organization that distributes food to hunger relief agencies, said a steady increase in demand for food aid indicates there are hungry Texans, children and adults alike.

"There are definitely hungry children in Texas," she said. Projections for 1999 show that the organization will distribute 120 million pounds of food to 19 Texas food banks, a 26 percent increase over 1996, when welfare revisions took effect.

"What we're finding within the food banking industry is we are not able to keep up with the increased demands on our member agencies," she said.

Bush made his comments as he prepares for the GOP presidential primaries, which begin next month. Yesterday, surrounded by his fellow Republican statewide elected officials, the governor filed the paperwork to appear on the ballot in Texas on March 14.

Afterward, in a news conference and, later, in an interview with the Star-Telegram, Bush said:

* Texas, facing potentially drastic measures to clean up its dirty air, was right to pull the plug in 1995 on a politically unpopular tailpipe testing program. The state later had to pay the contractor, Tejas Testing Technology, \$140 million for canceling the contract.

"I'm not so sure of your premise that the air would have been cleaner if we had centralized testing in the Metroplex or Harris County," Bush told a reporter. "I think that was an assumption that just wasn't valid."

* Vice President Al Gore, potentially his White House rival, is proposing to usurp the states' traditional role in overseeing education.

"What Al Gore wants to do is to run for federal superintendent of schools," Bush said. "The state's role is to build buildings, and the state's role is to pay teachers more. The federal role, to the extent that it's focusing on children, needs to demand for results and standards and high accountability."

Bush criticized Gore's proposal to provide universal preschool, saying the government already has a sufficient preschool program -- Head Start, essentially a program for poor children. "We've got a preschool -- called Head Start," Bush said.

* European demands to require labeling of U.S. beef produced with hormones, or of genetically altered foods, reflect a desire to "smear U.S. products."

"I sense they want to run a propaganda campaign," he said. "There

needs to be scientific labels as to whether something is safe or not. What I'm for is for there to be truth in advertising that enables a product manufacturer to clearly state nothing in this product is harmful to your health, for example."

Staff writer Bechetta Jackson contributed to this report.

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Send comments to jroot@star-telegram.com

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