Root of poor health

Tribune editorial board member Greg Burns’ engaging piece about the epidemic of hunger in Chicago highlights the patients we encounter on a daily basis (Commentary, Sept. 25). Social determinants of health, like food insecurity, result in dangerous health outcomes, including chronic disease, lifetime hospitalizations, and developmental issues for infants and toddlers. More than 609,000 Chicagoans live in the 44 square miles of food deserts and lack access to fresh produce or meat; 1.8 million low-income Illinois residents are often forced to dig into their food budgets to pay for other necessities, like utilities and housing.

Nationwide, 24 million low-income households have to choose "heat or eat." Often, these significant barriers to health can be removed with legal prescriptions.

In the Health Justice Project, doctors, social workers, lawyers and students of each profession are partnering to address the social and environmental causes — like unhealthy housing conditions and improperly denied food stamps — at the root of poor health.

— Emily A. Benfer, clinical professor of law, director of the Health Justice Project, Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Beazley Institute for Health Law & Policy