

Ending Hunger in the United States: The Role of the Federal Nutrition Programs, National Advocacy Groups and their Networks

HUNGER IN THE UNITED STATES

The federal nutrition programs have helped to decrease substantially the depth and breadth of hunger in our country. Far fewer people are hungry now than in the 1960's and earlier eras; and there is far less severe malnutrition.

Yet, hunger and food insecurity have persisted at unacceptable levels in the United States even as the economy has grown over the last 20 years. The tide of a strong economy does not raise every boat, and many families still struggle with intermittent employment, low wages, and increasing health, housing and child care costs. In the years between 1998 and 2002, for example, a period that included years of a robust economy, a year of recession, and years of recovery, the number of families considered hungry or at risk for hunger (food insecure) fluctuated slightly but never dropped below 10 percent of American households.

Hunger in the U.S. is not caused by a societal shortage of food; rather, it exists because millions of families living below or a little above the poverty line do not have adequate resources to meet all their basic needs, and are forced to make tough choices among food, rent, medicine and health care, child care and heat. Since food is not a fixed cost, it is one of the easiest for a family to reduce.

As defined by the federal government (the Census Bureau and the United States Department of Agriculture – USDA), a household is food insecure if, in the period involved, it “did not always have access to enough food for an active healthy life for all household members because they lacked money or other resources”; and it is food insecure with hunger if “at least one member of the household went hungry at one point or more during that year due to financial problems.” In this paper, we refer to the two categories as “food insecure” and “hungry.”

USDA's most recent report, for 2002, found that:

- Twelve million households, just over 11 percent of all U.S. households, were food insecure in 2002, with 3.5 percent experiencing hunger.
- 34.9 million people lived in these food insecure households, an increase of 3.9 million people from 2001. Of them 13.1 million were children.
- Among poor families (with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line), 33.7 percent were food insecure. Among near poor families (with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty line) 19.6 percent were food insecure.

The hunger and food insecurity experienced in the U.S. today are rarely life threatening. Rather, they harm, sometimes seriously, children's early development, health and educational achievement; cause lost productivity among the labor force; place an inordinate amount of stress on the family and its

members; contribute to obesity; and otherwise create a cascade of adverse personal, social, and economic effects.

THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS IN ENDING HUNGER

Through its nutrition programs, the federal government provides a very substantial amount of resources to combat hunger. The ones we will discuss in this paper are the Food Stamp Program, the School Breakfast Program, the National School Lunch Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and WIC. According to USDA, the programs provided 1.9 billion meals per month in 2000, and they have grown considerably since then. They provide in the aggregate more than \$40 billion per year in nutrition assistance. The emergency food network supplied another 198 million meals each month in 2000 (14 percent of which came from the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program – TEFAP).

Millions of people receiving assistance under these programs are lifted out of hunger and food insecurity by the benefits. Because of the nature of the government survey of hunger, however, the government cannot report how many people are made food secure by the programs. There are millions of food secure families living with below poverty incomes, however, and many of them are staving off hunger because they participate in one or more of the federal nutrition programs.

Many other families classified as hungry or food insecure relied on the nutrition programs in 2002 and were better off because of that, albeit not food secure. The programs improve the nutritional status of these families by providing them benefits directly (through food stamps and WIC) to increase the amount of food they can purchase and by providing nutritious meals and snacks to children in schools, child care and community programs, thus alleviating the family's overall food needs. Without access to these programs, the depth and breadth of deprivation experienced by these hungry and food insecure families would have been substantially greater. Yet, the benefits these programs provide are not adequate for many families to lift them out of food insecurity. The food stamp benefit, for example, averages 90 cents per meal, which is hardly enough to ensure access to an adequate diet.

And the programs still do not reach enough needy Americans. Only 54 percent of food insecure households reported receiving help in 2002 from one or more of three key federal food assistance programs: 28 percent participated in food stamps, 36 percent received free or reduced-price school lunch for the children, and 14 percent participated in WIC. (Data for 2003 are not yet available.) A much higher percentage of food insecure households should be participating in the nutrition programs.

The Food Stamp Program. Considered the first line of defense against hunger, the Food Stamp Program provides benefits (typically through a debit card) directly to families to purchase food. The benefit is based upon household size. A family of four may receive up to \$471 a month; for a family of two the maximum benefit is \$259. As family income rises, benefits go down, and the average actual benefit received is \$83 per month per person. Benefits should be increased, but the program still provides a very real support for low-income families. A recent USDA Economic Research Service report states that the Food Stamp Program significantly reduces the depth and severity of child poverty. But the program only reaches an estimated 62 percent of eligible persons, and an even smaller proportion of eligible working families.

WIC. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutritious foods, nutrition education, and access to health care for low-income pregnant women, new

mothers, infants, and young children at nutritional risk. Numerous studies have shown the positive benefits of participation in WIC. For example, it is estimated that every dollar spent on WIC results in between \$1.77 and \$3.13 in Medicaid savings for newborns and their mothers. The program has been proven to increase the number of women receiving prenatal care, reduce the incidence of low birthweight and fetal mortality, reduce anemia, and enhance the nutritional quality of the diet of participants.

The Child Nutrition Programs. The child nutrition programs provide federal dollars for nutritious meals and snacks served to children while they are in school, in child care (Head Start, child care centers, and family child care homes), in afterschool and summer programs, and in homeless and domestic violence shelters. Even though these programs do not provide direct support to a family's household budget as food stamps do, low-income children's access to these programs helps alleviate the financial stress on their families by providing good nutrition for many of the children's meals and snacks and substantially lowering the household's food costs.

School lunch provides at least one-third of the nutrition a child needs and the School Breakfast Program provides at least one-fourth. But the quality of school lunches needs to be improved; and only 42 percent of 15.5 million low-income children participating in school lunch also participate in school breakfast.

During the school year, afterschool snacks, and, in some cases, afterschool suppers are also available to help supplement the nutrition of many school children's diets. The Summer Food Service Program is designed to take the place of school breakfast and lunch when school is out. But again these programs are severely underutilized.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides children in child care up to two meals and one snack a day, a large portion of the daily nutrition a child needs. Also, through CACFP children living in domestic violence or homeless shelters may receive up to three meals per day.

The child nutrition programs not only are important in combating childhood hunger, but they also provide an important support to child development and educational and enrichment efforts. It has been well documented that school breakfast improves student achievement, behavior, and attendance. CACFP in child care has been shown to improve preschoolers' nutrition and the quality of child care. Summer food and afterschool nutrition programs help attract school-age children into programs that support learning and physical activity, and keep them safe and out of trouble while their parents are at work.

TEFAP. The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) provides USDA commodities to states, which distribute the food through local emergency food providers that include food banks, soup kitchens, and food pantries. The program also provides administrative funds to the emergency food network. TEFAP fills gaps for those in immediate need who are not receiving sufficient benefits from other federal nutrition programs, or for those who are not receiving any federal food aid at all.

Below we discuss some of the many ways that advocacy groups and their networks can stimulate further improvements and expansion of use of the federal nutrition programs, thereby reducing hunger. For example, increasing participation in most of the programs by 20 percent – an ambitious but attainable goal – would get an additional \$8 billion in food per year to America's hungry families and produce a substantial decrease in hunger.

ROLE OF NATIONAL ADVOCACY GROUPS AND THEIR NETWORKS IN USING FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS TO ALLEVIATE HUNGER

There is a major role for advocacy groups at the national, state and local levels to use the federal nutrition programs to reduce hunger because of two key facts: first, the programs are strong and effective, in part because of the groups' work; and second, since the programs are missing millions of eligible people, there is still much room for effective work to expand participation. National advocacy groups and their networks are fighting an on-going battle to make sure the programs reach the families that need them. Their arsenal includes:

- Raising public awareness about hunger
- Conducting outreach and engaging in social marketing
- Providing technical assistance, sharing best practices and developing partnerships
- Conducting administrative advocacy at the federal and state level
- Reducing local barriers
- Conducting research
- Seeking legislative improvements

The experience of recent decades shows that these strategies can work. Anti-hunger groups have used these approaches and contributed greatly to the doubling of school breakfast participation over the last 15 years, the quadrupling of afterschool food participation over the last six years, the doubling of WIC over eight years, and the one-third increase in food stamp participation since July 2000.

Raising Public Awareness about Hunger

Because of the widespread abundance in the United States, hunger is not a particularly visible problem. When most Americans picture hunger, they envision starving children in developing countries as shown on television, not children in the U.S. who go to bed hungry because there was not enough food for dinner, or who dread summer vacation and snow days because it means they will not be able to get school meals. But their hunger is real as well.

Anti-hunger organizations at the federal, state and local levels play an important role in increasing the visibility of hunger. They are the ones organizing events during the holidays to highlight the extent of hunger; encouraging media coverage of school breakfast and summer food programs; writing opinion pieces and letters to the editor on hunger issues; producing and placing Public Service Announcements; and conducting training for churches, schools, universities, and civic groups. They are the ones producing the data on hunger and talking to opinion leaders.

Conducting Outreach and Engaging in Social Marketing

One of the primary reasons the nutrition programs do not reach many of the families they are designed to serve is because the families simply do not know the programs are available to them. In fact, a recent report found that nearly half of the eligible people not participating in the Food Stamp Program were unaware that they were eligible. Therefore, conducting outreach campaigns is one of the most useful activities of anti-hunger groups. This includes not just informing families of potential benefits or organizations of their eligibility for the child nutrition programs, but helping them follow through in applying.

Outreach and marketing campaigns include such strategies as distributing flyers and other written materials, producing radio and television Public Service Announcements, advertising in public transit systems, recruiting utility companies to include information in their statements, asking movie theatres to show information during previews, and working with elected officials to promote the programs.

Sometimes campaigns target specific communities. For example, Congress recently made some groups of legal immigrants eligible for food stamps. Now, anti-hunger organizations are conducting extensive outreach within immigrant communities to inform them about their new eligibility for the program.

In the child nutrition programs, children do not have access to the meals and snacks the programs provide unless schools, private non-profits, or local government agencies sponsor the programs. Anti-hunger organizations must work to recruit organizations to operate them. For example, anti-hunger organizations' intensive school breakfast outreach efforts have increased school participation so substantially that now 78 percent of schools serving lunch also provide breakfast. Once child nutrition programs are available in a community, advocacy organizations must inform children and families about the programs, the benefits they provide, and how to participate.

Increasing summer food participation has proven extremely difficult, more so than for many of the other nutrition programs, so many anti-hunger organizations devote a substantial amount of time to summer food outreach, recruiting new sponsors and summer food sites and trying to attract children. Once summer starts, many organizations operate summer food hotlines that families can call to locate the closest summer food site.

Providing Training and Technical Assistance to Public Officials and Nutrition Program Providers; Sharing Best Practices; and Developing Partnerships

All the federal nutrition programs have complicated rules that can make it difficult for them to reach the people they are intended to serve. Anti-hunger organizations provide essential training, technical assistance, information dissemination and descriptions of best practices to a variety of stakeholders, including state and local agencies, out-of-school time providers, local officials, child care providers, and schools and school officials. A few of these strategies are described below.

Analyzing Participation Rates and Trends. One important support that anti-hunger organizations provide is analyzing participation in the nutrition programs, including state and local comparisons, trends, and other data. Reports on summer food, school breakfast, and child care food participation, for example, give advocates a wealth of comparative data to use in working in states and localities – interacting with the media and public officials to promote improved state and local administrative practices.

Sharing Best Practices. The national anti-hunger organizations also gather models and information on a diversity of best program practices to improve access (like shortening applications, creating local partnerships among providers, changing practices that reduce access for working families, and implementing options within the federal rules that increase the reach of the programs). For example, numerous studies have shown that offering school breakfast free to all children in a school (rather than just the low-income children) dramatically increases participation among the low-income children and improves achievement and behavior in the school. Within the federal rules, there is a paperwork-saving provision that allows a school to serve a free breakfast to all of its students. The provision is used primarily by schools with a high percentage of free and reduced-price students. Anti-hunger

advocates have become experts on the provision and the best ways to use it: the information has been widely distributed, leading local advocates to recruit schools to participate and serve universal school breakfast. Similarly, information about best practices in designing (shorter and clearer) food stamp applications and easing access for working families has helped boost food stamp participation.

Helping Programs and Families Understand the Benefits of Participating. Within the child nutrition programs, advocacy organizations provide a large amount of technical assistance to eligible sponsors of the summer and afterschool food programs and CACFP. They calculate the amount of reimbursement an afterschool or summer program or a family child care home could receive through the appropriate child nutrition program; develop and share information with providers on the education and health benefits of the programs; and provide information on minimizing costs, cutting red tape, and maximizing eligibility. For example, a community-based organization feeding 50 children an afterschool snack and supper during the school year and breakfast and lunch during the summer could receive nearly \$35,000 through the nutrition programs, and when the program learns of the availability of sums like this, it is more likely to participate.

Anti-hunger organizations also are taking a leadership role in using new technology to qualify family child care homes and summer programs for participation in the appropriate nutrition programs. Child care homes can qualify for CACFP at the highest reimbursement rates and summer programs can qualify for summer food reimbursement if they are located in a geographic area where 50 percent or more of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Fair Data, in collaboration with the FRAC, has developed a web-based tool that allows an advocacy organization, provider, state agency, or other person with internet access to easily find the optimal strategy to qualify sites. The tool also can be used to target outreach efforts.

To encourage participation in food stamps, advocacy organizations also provide potential participants information on benefits levels. A number of groups are developing web-based tools that allow families to find out their eligibility status and determine the amount of benefits they could receive. Since these amounts often are larger than families expect, the evidence is that this “pre-screening” encourages applications. The tool also tells families the documentation they will need to apply for the program so they do not waste a trip to the food stamp office.

Developing Creative Partnerships. National anti-hunger organizations have developed close working relationships with government associations of public officials, such as the American Public Human Services Association (the association of state welfare and food stamp directors), the National Governors Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National League of Cities, and the United States Conference of Mayors. The members of these groups often are the key to making the programs work at the state and local level. Anti-hunger organizations provide them information on best practices, outline the importance of the programs, and analyze the positive economic impact programs can have on states or local communities.

In addition, national and state anti-hunger organizations have developed partnerships with key organizations from other constituencies whose members can benefit from the child nutrition programs, such as afterschool groups (e.g., the Boys and Clubs of America and the YMCA of the USA); education groups (e.g., the Council of Chief State School Officers; and the National Association of Elementary School Principals); child care groups (e.g., the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies); and health groups (e.g., the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Public Health Association). Through these partnerships, the anti-hunger organizations

provide technical assistance on nutrition program expansion in the form of materials, conference calls, and presentations at conferences and meetings.

Administrative Advocacy at the Federal and State Level

National organizations and their networks work together to encourage USDA and state administrators of the food stamp or child nutrition programs to improve their regulations and administrative practices. Advocates have focused on changing rules to expand eligibility, decrease paperwork and minimize access barriers.

In the Food Stamp Program, complicated applications were considered to be one of the primary barriers to participation. Work by national anti-hunger groups resulted in USDA hiring a consultant to work with state agencies to cut the length of applications. With the added encouragement of many state-based anti-hunger organizations, numerous states have revised their applications to make them shorter and more user-friendly.

Anti-hunger advocates encourage USDA and state agencies to issue formal rules that increase access and to interpret programmatic rules in the most expansive way possible. In the Food Stamp Program, anti-hunger advocates partnered with immigrant organizations in the late 1990's to secure a favorable ruling from USDA confirming that the program receipt of food stamps would not undermine immigrants' legal status or ability to naturalize. In 2000 these groups worked together again to generate more than 400 letters that helped convince USDA to maintain a set of procedural protections for recipients. On another occasion, anti-hunger and immigrant organizations secured from USDA an option for states to maximize the possible allotment for eligible children residing with immigrant parents.

In the Summer Food Service Program, advocates successfully persuaded USDA to interpret rules in a manner that decreased paperwork for certain summer food sites. Prior to the change, these sites were required to collect income eligibility information from each child in the program, even if the program was located in a predominately low-income area. Now, such summer programs only have to show that they are in a low-income area.

Another example of a positive USDA rule change obtained by advocates involved the health and safety inspections that are required for afterschool programs to participate in the nutrition programs. Many programs were having difficulty obtaining the inspections in a timely manner from local authorities, or were being required to meet unrealistic requirements that would be applied to a commercial kitchen or restaurant. Advocates provided recommendations to USDA on improving the process, which USDA incorporated into new regulatory guidance, resulting in tens of thousands more children being able to receive nutrition in their afterschool programs.

Reducing Local Barriers

Anti-hunger organizations can reduce hunger by encouraging better practices at the local food stamp office, including providing better customer service, operating during non-traditional hours to better serve working parents, decreasing the amount of time families have to spend waiting at the office by extending certification (eligibility) periods or through better use of technology, making the offices child friendly, and improving the accommodations for non-English speakers. A recent study conducted by Abt Associates found that half of all food stamp recipients are now served by offices that offer extended hours, and virtually all offices that routinely serve non-English speakers have bilingual caseworkers or have interpreters available. Anti-hunger organizations' advocacy to improve the food

stamp office culture and the experience of food stamp recipients can create an important positive impact.

Advocates also work within local communities to improve access to the programs. They can organize a coalition of key stakeholders to address barriers and develop solutions. For example, one such working group in Kansas City, MO, which includes the Mayor's Office, the School Food Service Director, Cooperative Extension, the local food bank, and the city department of health, meets regularly to develop strategies to expand participation in the programs and has had a tremendous impact. A national anti-hunger organization helped to organize the working group and provides on-going technical assistance.

Since the group was created, the percentage of students who receive breakfast in addition to lunch grew to 65 percent. (The national average is only 42 percent.) The group also has conducted regular summer food outreach campaigns, resulting in 53 percent of the children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals participation in summer food compared to the 12 percent served nationally.

Conducting Research

Anti-hunger organizations conduct research on hunger and the strengths and weaknesses of the anti-hunger programs. They use this data to pinpoint need and target responses. America's Second Harvest, for example, has surveyed its food banks and found that many see the greatest seasonal increase in demand coming from families with children during the summer. This simple fact has underlined the importance of expanding the reach of the Summer Food Service Program.

Other research has identified the impact that hunger has on learning, health, and productivity, and the positive impact that the nutrition programs have on the nutritional quality of a family's diet, and on reducing obesity. Universities and USDA now conduct most of the primary research, but anti-hunger advocates often work collaboratively with them to identify areas that require research, and to assist in framing research projects. Even more importantly, anti-hunger advocates like FRAC and the Center on Hunger and Poverty play the crucial role of synthesizing data, presenting it in a way that policymakers and the public can understand, and using it to promote better public policies to eliminate hunger.

Anti-hunger organizations incubated the federal process of measuring hunger and food insecurity. During the 1980's, reports from across the country spoke of a resurgence of hunger, but many policymakers discounted the stories as anecdotal. In 1984, a federal Task Force on Food Assistance concluded that it could not "report definitive evidence on the extent of hunger" because an acceptable measure had not yet been developed. FRAC worked with the Connecticut Association of Human Services and a panel of child health and research experts to develop a comprehensive, scientifically valid study of hunger among low-income families with children under the age of 12. FRAC then coordinated a national replication of this Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP) in 20 sites across the country. CCHIP became a foundation for how the Census Bureau and USDA would eventually measure food insecurity on an annual basis.

Seeking Legislative Improvements

Anti-hunger advocates seek improvements in the legislation that determines the funding for, scope of and ease of access to the federal nutrition programs. In circumstances like the Congressional reauthorization of the Food Stamp Program as part of the Farm Bill in 2000, and the current reauthorization of the child nutrition programs, anti-hunger advocates are playing the important role of

protecting the programs from adverse changes and encouraging targeted expansions of the programs, based on needs identified by local, state and national anti-hunger organizations.

In preparation for both reauthorizations, anti-hunger advocates developed a series of recommendations to improve the programs based upon their understanding of the barriers, wrote position papers that outline why the changes need to be made, and analyzed the potential impact of proposed changes from other sources.

The work of the anti-hunger advocacy community in recent years has produced many essential legislative changes, including: a restoration of food stamp benefits for most legal immigrants; a dramatic expansion of afterschool food programs; a successful 13 state pilot project easing access to summer food; a series of grants for school breakfast expansion; millions of dollars in federal funding for food stamp outreach; and better rules for low-income working families in the Food Stamp Program.

CONCLUSION

Hunger and food insecurity continue to be far too prevalent in the United States. The federal nutrition programs do a good job of limiting the depth and breadth of hunger, but there is much more for them to do. National anti-hunger organizations and their networks can play a crucial role in further strengthening the nutrition programs and expanding their reach by highlighting the unmet need, conducting outreach to eligible families, providing technical assistance and training to remove unnecessary barriers, performing research, urging legislative improvements, and carrying out other strategies.

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