



# **Characteristics and Actions of Hunger Leaders Who are Not Directly in the Hunger Space**

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## **Introduction**

The mission of most anti-hunger organizations is to fulfill President Obama's initiative to end childhood hunger by 2015. To achieve this notable goal will require the active involvement of many diverse groups that have unique and, in some cases, broader missions than ending hunger. With new or unexpected allies, forming alliances calls for building on shared objectives while finding ways to work through differing goals and perspectives. The purpose of this paper is to identify the major actors in the education community, nutrition/health organizations, unions, private sector food companies, and trade associations and illustrate how they can play an effective role in ending hunger, while still pursuing their own missions. Are there cross-sector alliances between anti-hunger groups and these allied organizations that can be created and sustained that will address the goals of these groups, while aiding the effort to meet the goal of ending childhood hunger by 2015?

## **Education Community**

### **Characteristics**

The groups with the most influence in the education community include the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), representing parents and teachers. The National PTA is the largest volunteer child advocacy association in America. It has over 5 million members. Teachers unions, like the National Education Association (NEA) with 3.2 million members, are also key players. NEA's focus is on making the nation's public schools as effective as possible. School officials are represented by the National Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals and the American Association of School Superintendants. These educators are charged with the responsibility of preparing our next generation of leaders—leaders who will be required to live and compete in a global marketplace. While academic achievement and youth development are the primary focus of educators, they know that there is a relationship between nutrition and learning. So they know that participation in school breakfast and lunch programs is important for all children, but particularly for low-income children. As Mary Hatwood Futrell, former president of the NEA, has said:

Growing numbers of our students are coming to school burdened with disadvantages. More are poor and, because of poverty, more are ill-fed. To help these students succeed in school, we must not only have high academic standards, but we must deal with students' needs. Children cannot learn if they are malnourished or if they are too poor to have enough to eat.

### **Actions**

Parents, teachers, school principals, and school superintendents have a vested interest in ensuring that children have access to quality nutrition programs during the academic day so that they are ready to learn every day. Educators face the daily challenges of preparing

students for standardized achievement tests. Some years ago a school principal in South Carolina announced that his students were likely to perform better on these tests, as he offered kids a breakfast on test day. Parents and teachers were able over time to convince him that offering the federal school breakfast program every day was a better approach to increasing higher test scores while also improving school attendance and student attention spans in class. School officials also have a built-in incentive for making sure that all low-income children have access to nutritious meals at school: Title I funds (the largest source of federal funds for education) are distributed through a formula that is based on the number of free and reduced-price meals served in schools.

Members of the PTA are very interested in the quality of the meals served in their children's schools. PTA members were one of the most active groups involved in the 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization. The National PTA endorsed the Institute of Medicine's recommendations for new regulations improving the nutritional quality of school meals. These recommendations stress the inclusion of more fruits and vegetables and the serving of more whole grain products and more low-fat dairy products. These important nutritional changes in school meals will help reduce hunger and improve the nutrition and health status of the nation's children. They are of particular importance to low-income children, as these students rely upon school lunches for one-third to half of their total daily nutrient intake. The efforts of the PTA and other education groups on the 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization to improve the nutritional quality of school meals were rewarded by the publication of new and improved school meal nutrition standards by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The education, nutrition and health, and anti-hunger groups were able to generate over 130,000 comments on the proposed rule.

## **Nutrition/Health Organizations**

### **Characteristics**

Two of the main nutrition and health groups are the Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior (SNEB) and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND). SNEB seeks to enhance the skill set of nutrition educators and to influence policymakers about nutrition, foods and health. AND is the world's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a nutrition policy advocacy group. It represents a broad cross-section of groups with a focus on consumer nutrition policy. Its newsletter has over 900,000 subscribers. CSPI advocates for nutrition policies that are consistent with scientific evidence on health.

The American Public Health Association, American Heart Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics are the lead organizations in the health-care arena. These groups represent the vast network of public health officials, including clinic directors, nurses, physicians, and registered dietitians. All of these groups take part in activities of the

Child Nutrition Forum. The Forum has about 200 national organization members that support well-funded and well-managed child nutrition programs.

Like the major anti-hunger groups, all of these groups have substantial resources and large local memberships. Their principal focus is on nutrition policy and/or improving the health of the US population, particularly among children. They do not see themselves as “national anti-hunger organizations.” While they may view ending childhood hunger by 2015 as a desirable goal, it is not widely seen as a primary part of their mission. However, there have been several joint initiatives on federal nutrition programs that both anti-hunger and nutrition and public health groups have championed.

## **Actions**

The Institute of Medicine (IOM), part of the National Academies, has been a great catalyst in inspiring cooperation among these diverse but concerned organizations at the local and national level. In its 2009 report, **Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity**, the IOM recommended increasing participation in federal, state, and local nutrition assistance programs, including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), School Breakfast and Lunch Programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the After School Snacks Program, the Summer Food Service Program and SNAP (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program). In a later report, the IOM made recommendations to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for improving the nutritional quality of the school meals programs. These recommendations would increase the amounts and variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products in school meals programs.

The latter IOM report was a catalyst for public health and nutrition policy groups and anti-hunger groups to work together to achieve both of their missions: namely to increase participation of low-income children in federal nutrition programs, and thereby reduce hunger and obesity in this population, while also improving the nutrition and health status of all children participating in federal school nutrition programs. The joint activities of these groups produced amazing results in the 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization. This legislation raised school lunch reimbursements by six cents for schools that adopted all of the IOM report-based recommendations to improve the nutritional quality of school meals, thereby enhancing the nutritional quality of meals served to schoolchildren. In addition, this legislation required new nutrition standards for foods that “compete” with school lunch (*e.g.*, à la carte food items and foods and beverages sold in vending machines) and nationwide expansion of the after-school supper program.

These same groups are currently working on joint proposals for the 2012 Farm Bill. The nutrition and health community and many anti-hunger groups will support proposals that:

- oppose block granting SNAP and reducing program benefits;
- provide financial incentives for SNAP participants to purchase fruits and vegetables;
- establish tax policies that make it possible for major supermarkets to locate in underserved areas;

- improve the nutritional quality of foods available in corner stores; and
- make funds available for electronic benefit transfer (EBT) transactions at farmers' markets and farm stands.

## **Unions**

### **Characteristics**

A major union leader in the nutrition program space is the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) which has over 2 million members. A substantial number of their employees work in school lunch programs. Other significant players are the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). SEIU has 2.1 million members and is the fastest growing union in North America. SEIU represents healthcare workers and public school employees, including school meals staff. UFCW has 1.3 million members and has the most members under the age of 35 of any union. UFCW members work in supermarkets and in food processing plants. UFCW is actively involved in issues affecting SNAP and therefore is a major partner in Farm Bill coalitions. Unions tend to focus on bread and butter issues such as wages, hours, and benefits. Many members of AFSCME and SEIU have low wages, and their children qualify for free and reduced-price meals in the school systems that employ them.

### **Actions**

AFSCME and SEIU took an active role in the 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization. An issue of importance to their membership was paid sick leave. This issue was not ultimately included in the final bill, but union representatives were consistent partners in support of the legislative agenda of the nutrition program advocacy community.

Thousands of AFSCME and SEIU members work in school breakfast and lunch programs, so they know how important school meals are to children. Union support was crucial in securing the six cents per meal increase in school lunch reimbursements. School lunch reimbursements had not been increased (except for annual inflation adjustments) since 1973. These funds will be used to increase the nutritional quality of meals served to schoolchildren. Union support was also very helpful in obtaining funding for the nationwide expansion of the after-school supper program.

UFCW has been a partner with the anti-hunger community on issues in the 2012 Farm Bill and our Coalition to Preserve Food Choice in SNAP. Advocates and union members seek to strengthen and support SNAP by opposing block grant proposals or arguing against restrictions on food choices for SNAP participants. They also seek to expand current SNAP benefits by changing the basis for the SNAP benefit allotment from the Thrifty Food Plan to the Low Cost Food Plan, thereby increasing household benefits and purchasing power by 30 percent.

## **Private Sector Food Companies and Trade Associations**

### **Characteristics**

Historically, many private sector food companies and trade associations have been reluctant to take public positions on controversial nutrition policy issues or legislative proposals to expand federal nutrition programs. This is because they are concerned about potential criticism, as these companies may be seen by some as supporting policies that benefit their bottom line. However, there are several major food companies that have taken a leadership role in the support of anti-hunger work. They are: Walmart, ConAgra Foods, Tyson, General Mills, and Kraft among others. The leading trade associations in the hunger arena are the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA). The private sector food companies listed here realize that the federal nutrition programs represent a \$100 billion market. They also recognize that a well-nourished population is essential if the United States is to maintain its leadership position in an increasingly competitive world marketplace. These companies also possess significant political clout since they employ large numbers of people who live and vote in various congressional districts and states. FMI and GMA play an important role in advising House and Senate members on the potential positive or negative impact that nutrition policy proposals will have on the respective industries that they represent.

### **Actions**

Major anti-hunger organizations – such as the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), Feeding America, Share Our Strength (SOS) and the Congressional Hunger Center (CHC) – have formed a coalition with the leading private sector food companies and FMI and GMA focused on the emerging and controversial issue of limiting the food choices of SNAP participants. It is called the Coalition to Preserve Food Choice in SNAP. In the debate over health care, a Senate amendment was drafted, but not offered, that would have required the Centers for Disease Control (in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture) to develop a nationally approved list of “good foods and bad foods.” The result of such legislation would have been that 47 million SNAP participants would be prohibited from purchasing any foods from the “bad food” list. The complexity of creating and administering such a process for the over 300,000 foods currently in grocery stores and the 15,000 to 20,000 new food items introduced each year would be costly and ineffective. In addition, the adverse impact of stigmatizing SNAP participants would drive many low-income families out of the program.

The Coalition to Preserve Food Choice in SNAP believes that the best approach to improving the food choices of SNAP households is to provide these families with sufficient economic resources with which to purchase healthy foods, coupled with quality nutrition information about which foods have the highest nutritional value. If SNAP participants have enough money and good nutrition information, they will be able to choose foods that meet their families’ dietary needs.

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York and Representative James McGovern of Massachusetts have prepared draft legislation which will replace the Thrifty Food Plan with the more generous Low Cost Food Plan as the basis for monthly SNAP benefit allotments. This one change will increase the purchasing power of SNAP households by 30 percent. This approach avoids the stigmatization of SNAP participants in grocery stores and provides a positive supportive pathway to better health food choices, rather than spending millions of dollars creating and administering a system of “good food/bad foods” and prohibiting the purchase of items on the “bad food” list.

### **Conclusion**

CHC is actively engaged with each of the organizations, unions and private sector corporations on hunger and nutrition policy issues through either the Child Nutrition Forum or the Coalition to Preserve Choice in SNAP. These entities all have distinct policy agendas, but are willing to commit staff and financial resources to the challenge of ending childhood hunger by 2015. It is these cross-sector alliances that ultimately will be the key to successfully opposing attempts to cut nutrition programs or weaken federal nutrition standards.