

**America's Second Harvest**  
**Ending Hunger**

**The UPS Foundation and the Congressional Hunger Center  
2004 Hunger Forum Discussion paper**

**The Charitable Food Assistance System:**  
**The Sector's Role in Ending Hunger in America**

*By Doug O'Brien, Erinn Staley, Stephanie Uchima, Eleanor Thompson,  
and Halley Torres Aldeen*

*Public Policy & Research  
America's Second Harvest*

**Discussion Topic:**

- *What role can private sector food donations and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) play in ending hunger?*

**Paper Outline:**

- **Introduction**
- **A brief history of the EFAS and TEFAP**
- **Current Status of the EFAS and TEFAP**
- **The Demographics of EFAS Recipients**
- **The current role of the EFAS: feed the needy and advocate for change**
- **The future of the EFAS and the End of Hunger**
  - Early Warning – “the Canary in the mineshaft”**
  - Gateway -- Access to Public Low-Income Assistance Programs**
  - Grassroots-based Advocacy**
- **Conclusion**

## **Introduction**

Private, charitable emergency food assistance providers have an influential role in the larger effort to eliminate the problem of hunger in America. A recent government survey on the prevalence of hunger and food insecurity indicates that 34 million people were food insecure in 2002, including more than 9 million who were hungry.<sup>1</sup> An important response to the problem of hunger and food insecurity in the United States has been in the growth in food distribution activities of America's private, charitable food assistance organizations. These private organizations – food banks, food rescue organizations, food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters and similar entities – have played a crucial role in meeting the nutritional needs of America's low-income population and have helped prevent even greater rates of hunger. Better than 90% of nutrition assistance to low-income people is provided through the public sector, through programs such as school meals, food stamps, and WIC, but the private sector Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS) has an important complementary role to the primary government assistance programs.<sup>2</sup>

An estimated 23 million unduplicated people accessed emergency food in 2001 through an estimated 50,000 local charitable agencies.<sup>3</sup> On any given week in 2001, more than 7 million people accessed emergency food through food banks, food rescue organizations, pantries, community soup kitchens, and emergency shelters.<sup>4</sup> According to USDA research, food pantries alone distributed more than 2.9 billion pounds of food in 2001, which roughly translates into 6 million meals a day.<sup>5</sup> From the notion of “breadlines knee-deep in wheat” in the Great Depression to the current day providers of food assistance to marginalized working poor families, the growth of the emergency food assistance system has closely tracked with larger societal trends in the economy, the workforce, and public policy.

## **A Brief History of the Rise of the Emergency Food Assistance System**

To better understand the phenomenon of the emergency food assistance system, a brief history of growth in the sector is necessary. Soup kitchens, breadlines, and church food pantries have long existed in the United States, but there is little baseline data available about how prevalent these programs were historically.<sup>6</sup> Only since the early 1980s has there been a dramatic proliferation of local hunger relief agencies.<sup>7</sup> The rise of the emergency food assistance system can be divided into two main periods – the “emergency period” and the “institutional period.” The “emergency period” is noted by the phenomenon of “breadlines” and soup kitchens during the Depression of the 1930s and, later during this period, the establishment of food banks and predominantly faith-based soup kitchens and pantries in response to growing poverty in urban and rural America.<sup>8</sup> These programs were mostly small, meant to be temporary, and often a physical extension of the spiritual mission of congregations of faith.

The second period, or the “institutional period” – from 1980 to the present – is marked by a steep proliferation in the number of emergency food providers and changes in the demographics of the recipients of emergency food assistance. More than 80% of pantries and soup kitchens currently operating came into existence between 1980 and 2001. Less than 18% of either type of agency existed before 1980.<sup>9</sup>

Two significant occurrences helped transform the emergency food assistance sector from local, faith-based charities feeding needy people in their communities to the larger institutionalized system that currently exists. The first was the establishment and spread of the food bank movement, and later the food rescue movement. The food bank movement began in 1967, when businessman John Van Hengel established the first food bank at St. Mary’s Church in Phoenix, Arizona.<sup>10</sup> That first food bank relied exclusively on locally obtained, private sector donations from farmers who donated surplus or unmarketable produce and local grocers who donated baked goods and nonperishable canned goods. Food banks, as the model went, procured food donations, warehoused the same, and then made the donated food available to many local charitable agencies.

Very early on the food banks took on an ecumenical characteristic that has, over time, become fully secular by providing food to a wide range of local charities from a variety of different faiths. Within a decade of the first food bank at St. Mary’s, food banks had become established in approximately half of the states, and the movement took on a broader perspective when the food banks came together to create a national non-profit organization – Second Harvest. Second Harvest was founded as a “network” of 13 food banks in 1979; it grew to 29 food banks in 1980 and 44 food banks by 1982. Early on, the food banking movement was dependent upon federal support for its growth. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds through the Community Services Administration (CSA) assisted the fledgling food banks in the establishment and expansion of a national network. By 1982, all federal funding had ceased and the CSA had been disbanded; Second Harvest became increasingly dependent upon the food industry for in-kind donations of food and funds for operation.<sup>11</sup>

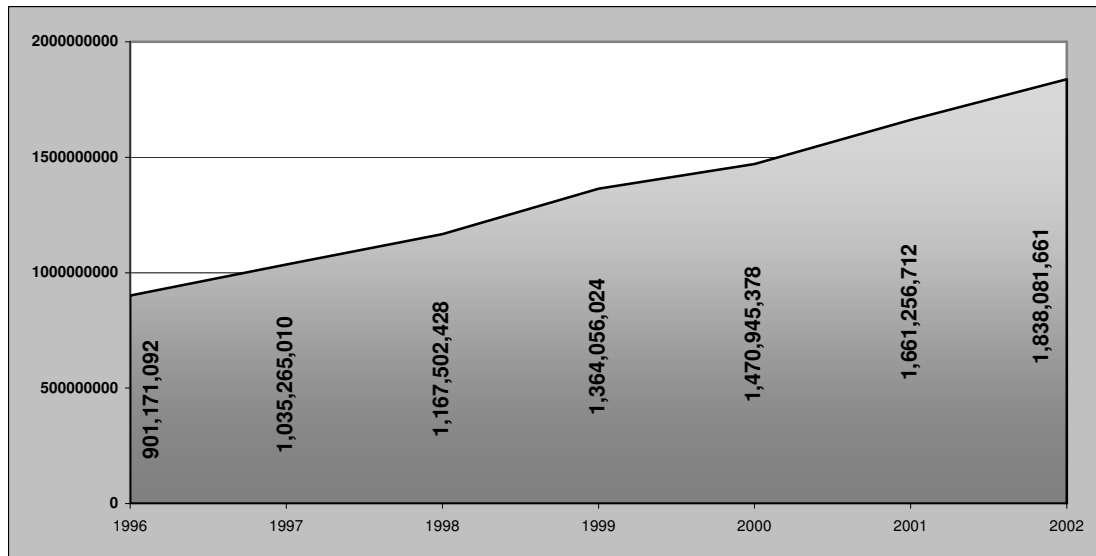
In 1982, Helen Palit founded City Harvest in New York City. City Harvest, unlike the more traditional food bank model established earlier, relied nearly exclusively on fresh produce from wholesalers and already prepared foods from restaurants, caterers and hotels. The “prepared and perishable food recovery” model – unlike food banks that typically warehouse inventories prior to distribution – the prepared programs relied on the rapid procurement and distribution of donated food. Most of the recovered food was, in turn, provided to emergency kitchens and similar congregate meal sites. As in the expansion of the food bank model leading to the founding of Second Harvest, prepared programs found outside support crucial in their early formative stages. With support from the Washington, D.C.–based APCO consulting, the UPS Foundation found an area where the company’s interest in the hunger problem and its specialized skill in rapid logistics could have an impact.

By the early 1990s, the prepared food programs, many of them already programs of food banks, established FoodChain, a network similar in scope to the Second Harvest network.

Like the early establishment of food banking, the FoodChain network was begun at the local level among individual non-profit groups in various cities, and in at least one instance the establishment of a statewide entity like California Emergency FoodLink, though the FoodLink model was an exception. With financial assistance, logistics planning and support, and strategic counsel (from the UPS Foundation), these programs proliferated in numerous cities around the country.<sup>12</sup> From fewer than a dozen prepared food programs in the early 1990s, by 1999 more than 125 programs were established. In 2000, after several years of negotiation and national strategic partnerships, and with the urging of the food industry, the boards and memberships of Second Harvest and FoodChain agreed to merge the two organizations and together they formed “America’s Second Harvest.”

A fundamental element of the food bank and food rescue movement was the notion of a “network” as opposed to a “system.”<sup>13</sup> This distinction allowed the various members of the network to act independently when appropriate and rely upon one another when the relationship was beneficial.<sup>14</sup> Both the national representation that America’s Second Harvest provides its members for major food donation procurement and distribution and the local autonomy of member food banks/food recovery organizations and their agencies have remained important characteristics of the movement and have played an important role in the expansion of the sector. From Second Harvest’s founding in 1979 – with 13 food banks distributing just over 15 million pounds – the network has grown to 214 affiliate food banks and food recovery organizations distributing nearly 2 billion pounds.

**125% Growth in Affiliate Distribution of Product Since 1996**



*Source: America’s Second Harvest Network Activity Report*

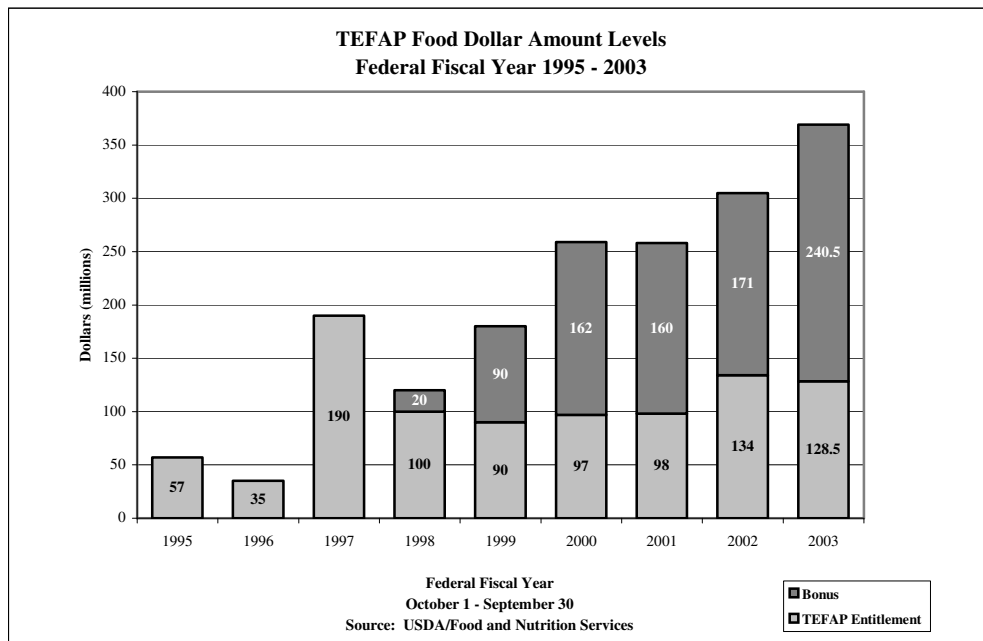
The second major catalyst that helped shift the charitable food sector from being isolated, locally-focused, faith-based entities to regional, institutionalized food banks was the federal government's re-introduction of surplus commodity donations and the creation of the Temporary Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). "During the early 1980s there was renewed interest in commodity distribution as large inventories of Government-held commodities, substantial reductions in Federal spending for food assistance programs, and poor economic conditions combined to exert pressure for expanded commodity donations by the USDA."<sup>15</sup>

In 1981, during the worst recession since the 1930s, the Reagan Administration reduced the Food Stamp Program substantially through a series of tightened eligibility requirements and reduced benefit levels. The outcry from the anti-hunger community and concerns in Congress led President Reagan to issue an executive order that allowed USDA to begin distributing stocks of farm-support commodities that had been held in storage for market removal purposes. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1982 extended the executive order and in 1983, the President's executive order was made into legislation with the Emergency Food Assistance Act and the establishment of the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). The establishment of TEFAP was, in essence, a return to the Great Depression's commodity assistance distributions under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).<sup>16</sup>

The initial TEFAP program distributed surplus commodities to states, counties and municipal governments. In 1984, an estimated 856 million pounds of food were distributed mostly through "mass distribution sites," in which a state or local government would distribute government cheese and other commodities in bulk from trucks. Most of the commodities distributed between 1981 and 1985 were dairy products (cheese), flour, cornmeal, and honey. According to House Agriculture Committee estimates, an estimated 19 million people received TEFAP commodities each month during that period.<sup>17</sup> Although some local governments did utilize the expanding private charitable food assistance system, most TEFAP commodities were distributed through local governments until surplus commodity stocks in storage had become depleted and the logistics of mass distribution had become too costly to continue. From a high of more than one billion pounds of surplus food distributed in 1987, surplus stocks fell to less than 276 million by 1989.<sup>18</sup> In response to the private sector's growing reliance on and desire for USDA commodities, in 1988 Congress included as part of the Hunger Relief Act a direct appropriation for TEFAP. As state and local governments began to withdraw from the direct distribution of commodities, a congressionally mandated pilot to distribute a broader variety of commodities (meat, poultry, fruits and vegetables) through food banks was implemented. The pilots of alternative commodities and distribution models showed that effective distribution – coupled with the distribution of privately donated food – could be an efficient alternative for TEFAP distribution, leveraging the federal commodities with donated private sector food and relying on tens of thousands of volunteers to extend program benefits.

In the 1990 Farm Bill, TEFAP was reauthorized and re-named by dropping the word “Temporary” and replacing it with “The” to become The Emergency Food Assistance Program. *Thus, a small name change for a relatively small program symbolized a shift in public thinking about the “temporary” role charities had in fighting hunger in America.*

Since 1990, TEFAP has been reauthorized twice, in 1996 and 2002. In each reauthorization, spending for the program has increased, and in 1996, the commodity food purchase appropriation was made “mandatory” through funding from the Food Stamp Act. The intertwining of TEFAP and the nation’s food banks began in earnest after the 1996 legislation. Prior to 1996, less than half of the states used food bank distribution models to provide TEFAP to local agencies; many states continued in the mass distribution model. By 2002, all but 7 states had fully adopted the food bank distribution model system. In the last reauthorization of the program in 2002, TEFAP mandatory food purchases were authorized at \$140 million and product storage and distribution grants were authorized at \$60 million. Another important feature of the program began in 1998, as TEFAP became an important outlet for bonus commodities purchased by USDA for agricultural market support purposes. Beginning in federal FY ’00, bonus commodities purchased by USDA to support farm incomes exceeded the Congressional appropriation, thus deepening the tie between the domestic food assistance providers and the agricultural market community.



### Current Status of the Charitable Food Assistance System

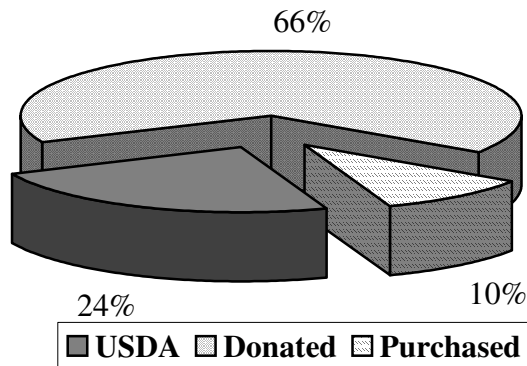
Organizations within the emergency food assistance system are typified by the following characteristics: 1) they are usually structured as 501(c)(3) non-profits; 2) between 65% and 75% are religious or faith-based; 3) they rely heavily upon volunteers, with most

operating almost exclusively with volunteer labor; 4) most rely on a combination of privately donated food, donated federal (USDA) commodities, and purchased food; 5) many – though not the majority – of emergency feeding organizations have some restriction on the frequency of use by recipients; and 6) they typically place few eligibility restrictions on needy individuals and families who seek emergency food, and in the case of soup kitchens, there are no restrictions on recipients.

The emergency food assistance system has three primary levels of involvement: 1) national nonprofit organizations like America’s Second Harvest that procure, distribute, and advocate on behalf of the EFAS; 2) regional or state-wide food banks and food rescue organizations that are nonprofit “wholesalers” of national, regional and locally obtained food that is distributed to local agencies; and 3) local “retailer” agencies such as food pantries, soup kitchens, emergency shelters and similar agency types that provide food assistance and often other services directly to needy people.

There are an estimated 400 food banks in the United States, according to the most recent research by the USDA-Economic Research Service.<sup>19</sup> Approximately 80% of all the food banks in the United States are directly or indirectly affiliated with America’s Second Harvest.<sup>20</sup> America’s Second Harvest affiliates, including food banks and food rescue organizations, distributed nearly 2 billion pounds of donated food and grocery products, that include nearly 1.5 billion from private sector donations, 450 million in USDA commodities, and nearly 50 million in purchased food. The America's Second Harvest network distributed the donated food through an estimated 50,000 local agencies operating more than 90,000 food assistance programs.

### **A2H FY2003: Source of Product Breakdown**





At the local level in 2002, an estimated 32,000 – 38,000 food pantries were in operation, providing an estimated 2.9 billion pounds of food to more than 21 million low-income unduplicated people.<sup>21</sup> On any given week, it estimated that 6.1 million people, representing 2.1 million households, accessed food from a food pantry.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, a recent Urban Institute study found that more than 4 million non-elderly, low-income families had accessed a food pantry in 2002.<sup>23</sup> Pantries are by far the largest component in the emergency food assistance system, accounting for an estimated 90% of the total number of people served through the EFAS.<sup>24</sup> Because pantries provide food for household consumption, the quantity of food recipients receive is typically much larger than either in kitchens or shelters. In about 40% of pantries, households are limited to receiving food once per month, usually due to concerns with the pantry's inventories.<sup>25</sup>

In 2002, soup kitchens, community kitchens and similar congregate meal sites for homeless people and other low-income populations were estimated to number between 5,300 and 5,700.<sup>26</sup> An estimated 1.1 million to 1.3 million unduplicated people received meals at emergency kitchens in 2001.<sup>27</sup> On any given week, an estimated 700,000 people received a meal at an emergency kitchen. On an annual basis, kitchens provide more than 173 million meals to recipients.<sup>28</sup> Emergency kitchens, unlike pantries, operate in predominantly urban areas and have historically served urban families and homeless people. The research over the last ten years has shown a marked increase in the number of employed families with children and families from outside of central cities that access emergency kitchens.

According to the America's Second Harvest study *Hunger in America 2001*, food banks are the primary source of food inventory for most of the emergency food assistance system, providing more than 59% of the food distributed by pantries, 43% of the food served at soup kitchens, and 36% of the food served at emergency shelters. Other important sources include food from religious congregations and food purchased by the agencies.

In both the America's Second Harvest study and the USDA-Economic Research Service study, a substantial majority of local agencies identify themselves as faith-based organizations. More than 75% of pantries and 71% of kitchens are faith-based.

All levels of the EFAS are heavily dependent on volunteer labor for distribution of food assistance, with more than 90% of the sector utilizing volunteer staff. Pantries, more than food banks or soup kitchens, are most reliant on volunteers with only one-third of pantries and half of emergency kitchens having any paid staff.<sup>29</sup> During the average week, volunteers outnumber paid staff 8 to 1 in pantries and 16 to 3 in kitchens.

The average volunteer gives 51 hours of time annually to helping provide food assistance in his or her community – the equivalent of more than one full-time workweek, plus overtime. An estimated one million different people volunteer in the EFAS. On any given week in the United States, approximately \$11 million in time and labor is donated by volunteers at local hunger relief agencies. This massive volunteer labor force is perhaps one of the greatest strengths and future areas of growth in the EFAS. “Nearly

everyone in the United States claims to have helped the hungry at one time or another.”<sup>30</sup> A 1992 national poll of registered voters found that 79% of respondents agreed that they have “personally” done something to help feed the hungry in their own community.<sup>31</sup>

## **Emergency Food Recipients**

Every four years, beginning in 1993, America’s Second Harvest conducts research into the scope and demographic profiles of emergency food recipients.<sup>32</sup> The America’s Second Harvest studies are independent research conducted by private research firms. The study *Hunger in America 2001*, from which the following statistics are taken, was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

By accessing food through private charities in their communities, emergency food recipients are by definition food insecure.

In 2001, 23.3 million unduplicated people accessed emergency food assistance through food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and emergency shelters, representing a 9% increase over the 1997 estimate of emergency food usage. On any given week in 2001, an estimated 7 million different people were assisted through the emergency food assistance system.

In 1995, the federal government, through the community food security measurement project, began to measure the prevalence of food security, food insecurity, and food insecurity with hunger. The food security measurement in 2002 estimated that 34.9 million Americans were food insecure, including 9.38 million people who were food insecure with hunger.<sup>33</sup> The food security measurement project has proven to be a useful tool to compare the similarities and differences between the larger population of food insecure and hungry Americans and those that utilize the EFAS. Another government-sponsored study of emergency food recipients was conducted in 2001 as part of the USDA-Economic Research Service Emergency Food Assistance Survey -- Client Survey.<sup>34</sup>

The USDA EFAS survey estimates that 4.3 million different households – including 8 million adults and 4.5 million children, received food from pantries in a typical month in 2001 and another 1.1 million people received meals from emergency kitchens during the average month in 2001.<sup>35</sup>

As in the food security measurement project and the USDA EFAS study, the A2H research finds that the majority of emergency food recipients are single-female headed households with children. Sixty-two percent of all adult emergency food recipients in 2001 were female, and of emergency food recipient households with children, 50% are single parent households.

Children represented 39% (9 million) of emergency food recipients in 2001. The America’s Second Harvest study found that one-in-ten American children received

emergency food aid in 2001 and nearly 20% of child recipients received food assistance through meals served at soup kitchens.

A substantial percentage of emergency food recipient households include at least one employed adult (38.9%) and 6.7% have two adults employed in the household. Despite employment, these households must rely on emergency food assistance to meet their basic needs. Less than two-thirds (63%) of adult emergency food recipients have a high school diploma or equivalent, substantially below the national average of 84% of all U.S. adults. Another 37% of adult emergency food recipients have not completed a high school level education.

The monthly income of emergency food recipients averages 80 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines. Nearly two-thirds (63.7%) of emergency food recipients had monthly incomes at or below the poverty line, and 75.4% had incomes at or below 130% of poverty. The average monthly income for emergency food recipient households was \$833 in 2001.

As identified in the USDA food security measurement project in 2002, just over half of food insecure households reported that household members participated in one or more of the three major federal food assistance programs—school meal programs, food stamps and the WIC program. Although eligible emergency food recipients do participate in school meal programs and WIC at rates consistent with overall low-income participation rates for those programs, a very low percentage (30%) of emergency food recipient households participate in the Food Stamp Program, substantially below the national average participation rate of 59%.

Both the USDA EFAS study and the food security measurement project suggest that the private, charitable food assistance system serves a diverse group of low income people, especially single parent families, families with children, the working poor, the unemployed, the homeless and seniors. The studies also suggest that EFAS recipients experience more severe hardships than the general low-income population. As the America's Second Harvest study found, there is a higher prevalence of poor health, material deprivation, and higher rates of homelessness.<sup>36</sup>

### **Emergency Food Providers – Feeding the Needy and Advocating for Change**

In 1993, an estimated 19 million low-income people accessed emergency food assistance in the America's Second Harvest network. By 1997, the number had grown to 21 million and by 2001, an estimated 23 million unduplicated people received emergency food assistance through the network. The considerable growth in requests for emergency food has led to two primary behaviors by the EFAS. First, to meet growing demands for food assistance, the EFAS has re-doubled efforts to increase food donations. Between 1993 and 2003, food donations to A2H increased by more than 100%. Over the same period, USDA commodities distributed throughout the EFAS increased by more than 400%.<sup>37</sup> Despite substantial increases in the amount of donated food made available throughout

the EFAS, the sector still represents only about 10% of all food assistance provided to low-income people, and approximately one-fourth of pantries and kitchens and more than half of food banks reported that they perceived more need in their communities than they could fulfill.<sup>38</sup>

In response to the need to increase food donations, America's Second Harvest and other national and state organizations in the EFAS became involved in public policy advocacy and lobbying. Initial advocacy at the national level was focused on protecting TEFAP from federal budget cuts, expanding surplus commodity donations, changing state distribution models, standardizing liability protection laws for food donors and agencies, and changing tax donation laws to provide better incentives for food donations.

In addition to advocating and lobbying for the specific interests of the EFAS, the sector also became an important advocate for the federal food assistance programs. Although various members of the EFAS, especially food banks, have from their earliest beginnings been allied with and participated in food program advocacy, most notably with the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), beginning in the mid-1990s, the EFAS began to aggressively lobby as a sector. The catalyst for the EFAS was the direct threat that welfare reform posed to their recipients. Social service providers – including America's Second Harvest, Catholic Charities USA, the Salvation Army, Lutheran Social Services and others – worked collaboratively, though unsuccessfully, with the larger advocacy community to oppose provisions of the 1996 welfare reform act (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act). During the debate on the welfare reform bill, Second Harvest organized press conferences in Chicago and Washington DC, sent food banks to lobby on Capitol Hill, and began a massive letter writing campaign. Despite the loss the welfare bill became for the emergency food providers, they had gained “battlefield” experience and confidence in their abilities to lobby.

By the end of 1996, old notions of emergency food providers as collaborators and “band-aids” to the problem of hunger in America had largely ceased. “Emergency food providers *have* become increasingly and publicly articulate about the fundamental needs of their clients, and increasingly active in lobbying and related activities,” notes Dr. Janet Poppendieck in *Sweet Charity*. Indeed, America's Second Harvest prior to 1993 had no formal public policy function. In 1996, the organization's self-declared lobbying expenses as reported on the IRS Form 990 were less than \$50,000 and only two staff dedicated a portion of their time to lobbying. By 2003, America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest hunger relief charity, had dedicated more than \$350,000 to direct lobbying, and had eight registered federal lobbyists (most with prior Hill experience) in both the Chicago office and in the Public Policy Field Office in Washington, D.C. In addition to direct lobbying, America's Second Harvest dedicated increasing resources to policy related research, including working collaboratively with FRAC, the Congressional Hunger Center, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and academic groups like the Brandeis University Heller School Center on Hunger and Poverty, and other organizations on conducting research and joint analysis of policies. In summation, in less than a decade, the emergency food assistance system grew beyond the notion of “food in

and food out” to address the larger issues of food insecurity and to advocate on behalf of policies that reduce demand for emergency food.

In 2001, America’s Second Harvest, FRAC, and the American Public Human Services Association (the association of food stamp and welfare administrators) led an early effort to reform and expand the Food Stamp Program in the 2002 Farm Bill reauthorization. Working collaboratively and representing – albeit informally – each of their sectors, the coalition was able to help secure more than \$8 billion in new food stamp funding. It is too simplistic to suggest that the coalition of food advocates, program administrators, and EFAS lobbyists were the singular coalition that achieved the food stamp expansions that emerged in the final bill. In fact, a much broader coalition came together and ultimately helped achieve the success. But, the original coalition played an important role in confining the Farm Bill debate to expansions in food stamps – not reductions in program spending – especially expansions targeted to populations that are disproportionately represented in food pantries and soup kitchens.

### **The Future of the Private Charitable Food Assistance System and the End of Hunger**

Since the founding of the institutionalized emergency food assistance system in the early 1980s, the EFAS has emerged as one of the principal advocates and advocate partners in the expansion of the federal food assistance safety net. The sector’s close relationship with the agriculture community, food companies, and their broad bi-partisan and community support has enabled the sector to speak with sophistication and political acumen on a wide variety of policies related to hunger and food assistance policy.

### **The “Canary in the Mine Shaft”**

The basic federal food assistance system has emerged and evolved over the last sixty years. Currently, USDA administers 15 federal food assistance programs that provide more than \$40 billion in nutrition assistance to low-income people. Most of the programs operated by the USDA are targeted at especially vulnerable populations – children, the elderly, the homeless and the poorest working families. An important role the EFAS has played in the past decade has been to be an early warning of economic and workforce shifts before they become more readily apparent to society at large. The early growth in the institutionalized EFAS first occurred in response to a severe recession in 1980-1981 and then continued to grow and meet their communities’ needs as manufacturing and other industrial jobs began to disappear from the U.S. economy. In the early 1990s, with the recession of 1991-1992, the EFAS again began to expand and in 1993 provided baseline data on the number of Americans that sought emergency food assistance – more than 19 million low-income people receiving charitable food aid. Two years later, food stamp participation would rise to the highest levels – nearly one-in-ten Americans – in U.S. history. In the late 1990s, during the strongest economy in the nation’s history, the EFAS again reported increasing numbers of Americans – 21 million – requesting emergency food assistance. The EFAS also reported that many, nearly half, came from homes where at least one adult was employed. The EFAS was an early warning of the fundamental weakness of the strong economy: too many low wage and service sector workers had little or no benefits or economic safety net, yet made too much to be eligible

for government assistance. In 1999, an estimated 14 million people were deemed working poor, meaning that adults were employed but their income level lifted them only slightly above poverty.

The EFAS has an important role as an early warning of economic hardship, especially for those that either cannot or will not access federal food assistance programs. As a 1999 U.S. General Accounting Office report on declining food stamp participation noted<sup>39</sup>:

“Data from USDA and several nonprofit organizations show that the demand for food assistance by low-income families has increased in recent years, indicating that the drop in food stamp caseloads is not solely the result of a strong U.S. economy. According to these data, the need for food assistance has not diminished; rather, needy individuals are relying on sources of assistance other than food stamps.”

The very act of providing food assistance at charities when food stamps, school meals, WIC, and other programs are available belies the inadequacy of these programs. This is not to suggest that the federal food assistance programs do not work, rather that the benefit levels, access to the programs, and eligibility requirements of these programs are under funded, too bureaucratic, and out-dated for the current economic realities of millions of low-income Americans.

### **The Gateway to Federal Food Assistance Programs**

As the research on emergency food providers has shown, a relatively small percentage – only 30% -- of emergency food recipients are enrolled in food stamps even though the vast majority of recipients (67%) are income eligible for the program. The reasons emergency food recipients do not apply for programs like food stamps are complex, but access and information about their possible eligibility is clearly an important factor. As the America's Second Harvest *Red Tape Divide* report showed, for many emergency food recipients – especially the elderly and working poor – access to welfare offices is very limited. Transportation problems and office hours conflict with work schedules, child care responsibilities, and transportation options. Food stamp outreach pilot programs funded by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service and conducted by the Atlanta Community Food Bank, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank and others have demonstrated that emergency food recipients could be targeted through outreach and provided information on enrollment in federal food assistance programs.

The next step in the evolution of the EFAS is to become a gateway for federal food assistance programs. The intertwining of federal programs and the charitable sector began with TEFAP. The EFAS providers became familiar with federal rules of non-discrimination and limitations on certain types of activities, especially those related to religion. While embracing the federal requirements, albeit limited, necessary to distribute federal commodities, the EFAS providers were able to maintain their basically volunteer nature and the informality and flexibility of their programs. Clearly not all EFAS providers would or could serve as gateway programs to federal food assistance and other low-income support programs, but much of the outreach for the public support programs

is already being undertaken by these private entities. The *Hunger in America 2001* report found that 15% of pantries and 32% of emergency shelters provided food stamp eligibility counseling. Twenty-two percent of pantries provided utility program assistance, and more than one-third of pantries and emergency kitchens provided food assistance program information and referral services.

As millions of Americans find that they can generally access the EFAS as their need dictates, it seems a natural evolution to equip the private charitable sector to become more than an information and referral service, but to actually become a gateway to enrollment in the public programs, especially food stamps. The federal government should use the private charitable sector as a vehicle for enrolling eligible people into the Food Stamp Program.

### **The Private Charitable Sector and Grassroots Advocacy to End Hunger**

One of the most important roles the EFAS serves in the larger effort against hunger is to be a face-to-face opportunity for many middle-income and food secure American volunteers to witness hunger in their own communities. Drawing on the efforts of more than one million volunteers annually, the EFAS provides first hand accounts of the scope and the nature of the problem. If the rate of volunteer retention is an indication, these volunteers do seem to think that their work matters. As noted earlier, the average volunteer spends an average of 51 hours annually combating hunger in his or her own community and is there as more than a mere observer. Indeed, volunteer services are crucial to the day-to-day operation of most of the EFAS providers.

The goodwill of the American people to assist the most unfortunate in their communities is not limited to those with the time available to volunteer at food pantries or soup kitchens. A 2003 public opinion poll of registered voters conducted for Bread for the World and the Alliance to End Hunger found that 59% of voters said people in America were generally hungry due to circumstances beyond their control. More than 72% of voters said families “really need anti-hunger programs” and 85% agreed with the statement that there are families “where the parents work and they still have trouble feeding their children.”<sup>40</sup>

For more than a decade, the nation’s anti-hunger leadership organizations have sought a way to mobilize the kind of public support necessary to forge the political will to end hunger. The EFAS could already be defined as a movement, one that has existed with considerable staying power since the early 1980s and has grown as the needs in their communities have grown. The challenge ahead lies in strengthening the charitable food assistance system and empowering its volunteers and supporters to take the next step toward political action that leads to strengthening federal food assistance programs and other income supports for low-income people.

## Conclusion

Since the early 1980s two systems of food assistance for low-income Americans have emerged, the public and private systems. The intertwining of public assistance programs and government-donated commodities through TEFAP with charitable feeding organizations and private sector food donations has become the norm. Millions of low-income people avail themselves of both systems to avoid hunger, and many also opt for the charitable food assistance programs because of the relative ease of receiving assistance in their own communities. The private charitable food assistance system is widespread, flexible, innovative, and generally effective; it is nonetheless only a fraction of the size of the federal nutrition safety net. Private charitable food assistance can only be a complement to federal nutrition programs. Strengthening and expanding TEFAP and other supports for the private emergency food assistance system helps to stabilize local charitable agencies and enables them to broaden their outreach activities in food stamps and other low-income support programs. As changes in the food industry – including greater technological reliance and inventory control – become the norm and reduce the amount of private sector food available for donation, the reliance on local hunger relief agencies on federal commodities and purchased food is likely to increase. Private charitable food providers should become gateways for federal food assistance programs, not as a competitor to the local welfare office, but as a complement to that work – helping to enroll millions of working poor families, the elderly and other vulnerable populations that underutilize the Food Stamp Program. Finally, there is a need for leadership that excites, motivates, and advocates for a stronger food assistance system and that incorporates the already existing volunteer base upon which charities rely and the broad public support from which charitable agencies benefit. By strengthening the public and private sector food assistance systems, together we can end hunger in America.



---

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Nord, Andres, Carlson. *Household Food Security in the United States, 2002*. USDA – Economic Research Service, 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> Ohls, Saleem-Ismail. *The Emergency Food Assistance System – Findings from the Provider Survey*. USDA-Economic Research Service, 2002. For the purposes of this discussion paper, I will use the term “charitable food assistance system” and emergency food assistance system (EFAS) interchangeably, but as the paper will show, private sector food programs have long ceased to be “emergency” providers and are now institutionalized in many, if not most, communities.
- <sup>3</sup> *Hunger in America 2001, America’s Second Harvest*
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ohls, Saleem-Ismail. *The Emergency Food Assistance System, 2002*.
- <sup>6</sup> Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement.*, 1998.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> An important occurrence during the “emergency period” is the creation of the first food bank by John Van Hengel in Phoenix Arizona at St. Mary’s Church in 1967. By 1979, thirteen food banks established Second Harvest. Those founding food banks and their new national organization help usher in the “institutional period” in the history of private sector food assistance.
- <sup>9</sup> *Hunger in America 2001, America’s Second Harvest*
- <sup>10</sup> Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity*. Dr. Poppendieck provides an excellent primer of the complex history of food banking and Second Harvest.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Daponte, Bade. *The Evolution, Cost, and Operation of the Private Food Assistance Network*. Institute for Research on Poverty – University of Wisconsin – Madison, 2000.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Rise and Fall of USDA Food Donations to America’s Hungry: Does Charity Really Begin at Home?* U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Government Operations, 1992.
- <sup>16</sup> For more information on the Depression-era commodity distribution programs, please see the UPS Foundation Discussion Paper ‘Hunger in America’ and Dr. Janet Poppendieck’s *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression*, Rutgers University Press, 1986.
- <sup>17</sup> Daponte, Bade. *The Evolution, Cost, and Operation of the Private Food Assistance Network*.
- <sup>18</sup> USDA-FNS, Food Distribution Division, 1999.
- <sup>19</sup> Ohls, Saleem-Ismail. *The Emergency Food Assistance System*.
- <sup>20</sup> Kim, Ohls, Cohen. *Hunger in America 2001, Final Report*, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. for America’s Second Harvest, 2001.
- <sup>21</sup> The range of the number of emergency providers is from the estimated number of agencies from the A2H *Hunger in America 2001*, and *The Emergency Food Assistance System – Findings From the Provider Survey*, USDA-Economic Research Service, 2002.
- <sup>22</sup> *Hunger in America 2001*
- <sup>23</sup> Zedlewski, Nelson. *Many Families Turn to Food Pantries for Help: Snapshots of America’s Families III*, Urban Institute, Washington DC, 2003.
- <sup>24</sup> *Hunger in America 2001*.
- <sup>25</sup> Ohls, Saleem-Ismail. *The Emergency Food Assistance System*. USDA-ERS
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> *Hunger in America 2001*
- <sup>28</sup> Ohls, Saleem-Ismail. *The Emergency Food Assistance System*. USDA-ERS
- <sup>29</sup> *Hunger in America 2001*
- <sup>30</sup> Eisinger, *Toward an End to Hunger in America*, Brookings Institution Press, 1998.
- <sup>31</sup> Breglio Poll 1992, sponsored by Kraft General Foods.
- <sup>32</sup> The America’s Second Harvest report *Hunger in America 2001* is independent research conducted for America’s Second Harvest by Mathematica Policy Research Incorporated. The information contained in

---

the report is comprised of data from 104 food banks surveying 24,000 local emergency food agencies (pantries, kitchens and shelters) and face-to-face interviews with 32,000 recipients, randomly selected at emergency feeding sites. The data collection was conducted January 2001 through April 2001 at sites throughout the country. The *Hunger in America 2001* report, as well as 101 local studies and 19 state studies are available through America's Second Harvest at [www.secondharvest.org](http://www.secondharvest.org).

<sup>33</sup> Please see the discussion paper Hunger in America in this series for additional information on this subject,

<sup>34</sup> Briefel, Jacobson, Theil. *The Emergency Food Assistance System—Findings From the Client Survey*, 2003, USDA-Economic Research Service.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> USDA-FNS, Food Distribution

<sup>38</sup> Ohls-Saleem-Ismail, *The Emergency Food Assistance System*, USDA-ERS

<sup>39</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Food Stamp Program: Various Factors Have led to Declining Participation*. GAO/RCED 99-185, 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Freedman, Knapp, McLaughlin, *Hunger: An Emerging Issue: Results and Analysis of recent National Public Opinion Polling*. Bread for the World and the Alliance to End Hunger.

---