

Testimony by Rhonda Sanders, CEO of the Arkansas Foodbank
To the National Hunger Commission
May 19, 2015

My name is Rhonda Sanders and I am the CEO of the Arkansas Foodbank. I want to welcome you to Arkansas and thank you for the time you are spending in Arkansas to better understand our struggle with food insecurity. I am honored to be here today to provide you information concerning the experiences of the Arkansas Foodbank in combating hunger.

The Arkansas Foodbank is one of 5 Feeding America food banks in the state and is a founding member of the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, the state association in Arkansas. The Arkansas Foodbank utilizes approximately 300 local agencies to serve 33 counties in central and southern Arkansas. I have provided you with a map showing the statewide coverage area of each of the Feeding America food banks in the state. There are a other food bank partners in the state that are independent including Project Hope in Garland county and the Arkansas Rice Depot in Little Rock that are partners with the Arkansas Foodbank. The core mission of the Arkansas Foodbank is to acquire, store and distribute food and other resources to hungry people. Last year we celebrated our 30th year with a record distribution of 22.4 million pounds of food. We distributed 20,831,289 lbs. in our 33 county service area in 2014 and 70% of that food were distributed at no cost to our Agencies. The other 1,578,711 pounds was distributed to our sister food banks in the state as part of our state association agreement to serve as the missing center for the state. 80% of this food came from donated sources only about 8% came from a governmental source. The other 12% was purchased. The food AF acquires and distributes helps feed over 273,000 people in our service area annually. Even with this enormous contribution Arkansas still suffers from some of the highest food insecurity rates in the nation.

The Arkansas Foodbank has identified specific goals to help us meet the need and to reduce food insecurity. They include the following:

1. Expand the amount of fresh produce that is provided to clients through our pantry system. Last year 4.3 million pounds of fresh produce was provided to clients. This was a slight decrease from the previous year as spring rains and lower than average temperatures directly affected crops in the state. While the Arkansas Foodbank has grown its produce program over the past 50 years it is constantly challenged with identifying available produce and the high cost of transportation and packaging. We partner with the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance to leverage costs and access to produce within the state. However, Arkansas' main crops are exported rice and soy beans not fresh produce. The development of new markets for produce will be critical for growing access to fresh produce in the future.
2. Arkansas is number one in the nation for senior hunger. Nearly 26% of our senior citizens struggle with food insecurity. Unfortunately for senior citizens there are no school breakfast and lunch programs not are there any after school feeding sites. The

work we do for senior citizens is through our pantries utilizing donated product and commodities. In order to better serve seniors we have engaged our pantries in the development of pilot projects to improve access. These pilots have tested several ways to improve services including pantry access, SNAP enrollment, buddy programs, senior specific foods, weekend bags and outreach. We are now expanding our senior programs by training other pantries and working to increase inventory of senior friendly foods. The data shows we have increased the number of seniors served by 12% in one year. Once again accessing much needed food is one of the biggest issues.

3. Finally, we are continuing to develop ways to reduce hunger among the hungry children in our service area. We provide a limited number of back packs to schools in our area and we have developed 7 school pantries to provide food to students and their families. 80,000 children (33%) are served through our local agencies and local feeding programs. The Arkansas Foodbank serves as a sponsor for 14 after school feeding sites and 10 summer feeding sites. The USDA feeding programs like after school and summer have provided numerous challenges to sponsors like the Arkansas Foodbank. The Arkansas Foodbank has typically run a program where we educate our sites and provide food that is prepared on site as a hot meal. In recent months many of our more urban sites have chosen to purchase pre-packaged meals from a vending service as it saves time and removes the possibility of error at the site. While this trend has been advantageous to sites in urban areas the lack of services for children in rural areas has continued to increase and the Arkansas Foodbank has chosen to focus on children in our most rural and economically disadvantaged counties.

The Arkansas Foodbank is currently involved in an education effort through Feeding America to build our capacity to serve children in rural areas. By participating in this effort we hope to glean an understanding of new strategies to help children in rural communities. Unfortunately we continue to hit roadblocks at every turn. I want to take one of our counties, Montgomery County, and use them as an example of the issues. Montgomery County is just west of Hot Springs and is about an hour and a half drive from our office. There are approximately 600 children in the county that are food insecure with no summer feeding programs in the entire county to serve those children throughout the summer. In an effort to serve those children tried to develop a model that would serve children in that county. The USDA reimbursement helps to make it affordable but can only be used for congregate feeding. To develop congregate feeding sites in that county we would only be able to serve about 40 to 60 children. This is using a couple of different sites and a mobile vehicle to move from one location to the other. If there was a way to waive the congregate requirements for situations such as this a mobile service could follow school bus routes and deliver meals to children who would have received free/reduced lunch during the school year. While there are many good things about congregate feeding, like accountability and enrichment, but in some situations it is not the best for children. We recognize that schools would be the best place to provide meals during the summer months. But with so many schools stretched to the limit with education opportunities they often

are not able to open all summer and provide bus service to the school. I hope during your travels and discussions you take a good look at ways to modify the summer feeding program and allow for rural services to be provided in a non-congregate setting.

The Arkansas Foodbank is working diligently to be a part of the solution to hunger. In no way do we feel that the Arkansas Foodbank or the charitable food system is the complete answer. While it is clear that food banks are no longer just emergency food we still have the capacity to provide only a limited amount of food to those in need. Clients utilize our resources to fill a gap not their entire pantry. According to recent data from Bread for the World \$102.5 billion was provided in government food assistance in 2013, \$5.2 billion in private food assistance was provided through the emergency food system. This means that the charitable food system only provides about 5% of the food annually to hungry people. The food banks in Arkansas stand ready to fill the gap and step up to do more if necessary. However, we are only one piece in the puzzle for solving hunger. It takes everyone working together to create a community where no one has to go hungry.