



## **UP CLOSE AND IN REAL TIME**

### **Invited Testimony to the National Commission on Hunger**

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**Presented by**  
**Charolette F. Tidwell**  
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**May 19, 2015**

## INTRODUCTION

This testimonial to the National Commission on Hunger on this day, May 19, 2015, is the combined effort of Ken Kupchick, Director of Marketing and Development for the River Valley Regional Food Bank located in Fort Smith, Arkansas and myself, Charolette Tidwell, Director of Antioch Consolidated Association for Youth and Family, a hunger relief not-for-profit agency, also located in Fort Smith.

## PERSONAL BACKGROUNDS

Ken Kupchick

Mr. Kupchick has served the food bank for the past five years and has been instrumental in raising the awareness of the community at-large to hunger-related issues and the need for building the capacity and capitalizing on logistical synergies at the agency level. Prior to serving at the food bank, Mr. Kupchick was an economic analyst and sales management executive in trucking industry with ABF Freight System.

The River Valley Regional Food Bank maintains an active roster of 188 member agencies feeding approximately 43,000 people in an 8 county area of West Central Arkansas, slightly larger than the state of Connecticut. The food bank distributes nearly 8 million pounds of food annually with an estimated value of approximately \$13.1 million. The food bank is a member of Feeding America, the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance and is a community partner of the United Way of Fort Smith Area

Charolette Tidwell

My professional background includes 36 years in acute care and long term care nursing, nursing administration, and human resource development at the hospital and corporate levels along with 15 years of experience as the director of Antioch.

Antioch distributes over three-quarters of a million pounds of food a year to approximately 7,000 individuals a month, and 11,750 unique individuals each year. Antioch is an all-volunteer organization. We operate the largest food pantry operation in Fort Smith and uniquely a Senior Mobile Pantry geared to serve residents in low-income housing in the surrounding area.

As a child, I experienced the issues of being raised in poverty. Together with my professional experiences, I bring a health perspective to the ravages of poverty and hunger.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We present to you today our personal perspectives in providing for those resigned to supplementing their family budgets with donated and salvage foods. I will focus on the plight of the elderly facing financial, medical, nutritional and transportation hurdles. Arkansas leads the nation in terms of the percent of its elderly population threatened by hunger. I would like to draw attention to our children and the obesity problem as they rely on canned foods, over processed microwave meals and snacks. And I would like to discuss our families who are disconnected from a sense community, often as a result of a chronic reliance on food pantry and other government assistance programs.

To effectively reduce very low food security among the one-in-five Arkansans struggling with hunger, we must restore a proper sense of place within our broken neighborhoods.

At a time when public school budgets are being slashed, each low income elementary school needs to become guiding light oasis to our youth. We cannot accept that 70% or more of a school's student population live in a household with income levels so low that the government must step in and provide two supporting meals and think our work is done. Just as man may not live by bread alone, children deserve so much more. Our schools serve as beacons of hope. They are Oz.

For our elderly, we must stop marginalizing their current circumstances. When we know that one in four young adults will eventually become long-term disabled, and we know even the financially secure are just one paycheck or two from financial insolvency, we must treat our elderly neighbors with the same compassion as we do our youth.

It's an uncomplicated philosophy at Antioch. Treat people as people. We are dealing with too large a population base not to do so -- one in four seniors, one in five adults, and as many as one in three children. The problem is too severe to ever treat people severely.

I believe that there are fundamental individual rights:

PASSION

CARING

RESPECT FOR OTHERS

I believe that there is too much judging of others and far too much marginalizing. We cannot push others down based upon title, income or level of education. We can lift up. I see much promise in so many that come to the pantry. Connecting opportunities of hope is how I can help them far beyond a box of food.

The old folks may say, 'even a fool can teach you something.' Foolishness in that equation is within the one who fails to listen and fails to see potential.

My approach is no different than yours. I want a better America and a better Arkansas. I want the 4<sup>th</sup> of FDR's Four Freedoms -- Freedom from Want, to be a reality in this world. Consequently, we need to create an environment of hope -- an environment that allows hope.

People will rise to the occasion when barriers are removed. Everyone wants to be successful.

We must recognize that all parents, and foster parents, want to raise whole children -- and have just as much desire to do so as any other parent.

It takes a holistic approach. We cannot disqualify any group of people as less than important than another. The need is great and all across the spectrum, by age, by race and by circumstance.

Effective ways of reducing and even preventing food insecurity come from partnering across the spectrum as well. Solutions are not necessarily found in empirical data. I believe the "man on the ground" can be just as instrumental

in solving problems as they know how to do it and how to get it done. Strategies are sometimes best developed from the bottom up.

Nonetheless, the empirical data, IN FACT, points to an America in trouble and an Arkansas in crisis. The data, IN FACT, amalgamates to a nation in need of feeding over 49 million of its citizens facing food insecurity. The data, IN FACT, drills down to Counties dramatizing wide swings in adult and child food insecurity in rural, suburban and urban locations.

Studies and analyses continue to show the interconnectedness of food insecurity as it relates to compromised nutrition, compromised health, and compromised education. As such, the problem remains interdisciplinary, as does its solution.

We continue to look at food insecurity in terms of a two dimensional chart with food insecurity on the X axis and these socio-economic ills on the Y axis. But there is also a “Z axis” to consider. With food insecurity comes varying degrees of stress, anxiety, anguish and diminishing health. Food insecurity impacts the individual, the family, the community and our society.

I see a continuum of emotion in my work that deserves acknowledgement.

- First I see, people who have grown comfortable with a continual dependence on food support

But I also see:

- Families breaking from the stress of month after month with a need for more food and the stability it brings
- People experiencing chronic stress and anxiety, especially mothers, which causes untold medical and psychological problems both now and later on down the road
- People humiliated by needing food, especially seniors
- Even People exuberant from the relief of finding help. Yes, coming to a food pantry can be a happy experience.

Sadly, I see,

- Children oblivious to it all and children knowing far too much for their age

I would like to stress that just as we often see “**unintended consequences**” to government actions or interventions, when it comes to creating food security, there are definitely “**unrealized benefits**”.

The hunger relief work that I do, and that I can do with the help of Feeding America, the River Valley Regional Food Bank and the USDA, certainly has benefits beyond feeding. We often talk in terms of economic benefits and their multiplying effect on our community, there are intangible benefits that perhaps matter even more.

- We are feeding minds, bodies and souls, that’s true.
- We are hopefully advancing children and their dreams.
- We are keeping families Together and Whole. The dinner table remains the place where everyone is there.
- We help to reduce physical and emotional abuse of spouses, children and the elderly.
- We are making Employees more productive and reliable.
- We bring back family tradition
- We foster a sense of community and belonging within it.

Is it not in these ways, that we make Arkansas and America Better?

I would like to address my further comments to the three groups of people I first mentioned: seniors, children and families. I would like to address our senior population first, as they are often the most forgotten segment, and often maligned in discussions about food insecurity.

## SENIORS

I personally experienced difficulties in getting food into the senior complexes. Resistance came from an honest disbelief that a problem existed. Housing managers simply did not see a need.

Why? Because our elderly are reluctant to ask for help. This is their norm.

Now, quite honestly, they bank on the delivery of the food. They can tell you the month, the date and time that I will be there.

Now, they are open in their communication about their food insecurity.

The “War Senior” – those over 70, won’t trust until they first know that you care. It takes building a relationship

And constancy. You must abide by your word. If you say you’re going to do something, you better do it come rain, hail or snow.

### ***What do seniors want from a pantry?***

They are a generation of nutritious food eaters and understand what good nutrition is. They are the ones that came off of farms and grew their own food. If they can make a garden, they will eat out of the garden they tend.

Trust me when I say; they are not the “Microwave Generation.” They “cook -- not wave” their food.

They don’t like pre-prepared or frozen prepared foods. That’s why so many fall through the cracks of Meals on Wheels.

They like fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, meat and dairy – they just can’t afford them. They like their carbs.

Fresh foods bring them joy - *talk about “unrealized benefits!”*

They will accept uncooked frozen meats.

They know what to do with any of the fresh fruits and vegetables that I provide. They are traditionalists and they are certainly not wasteful. I pick up from the farmer's market - greens, lettuces, carrots out of the ground, and green onions. They appreciate them all. I will tell you this, they are high on the jellies and jams, too.

The under-70 Senior is a new generation of elderly and the group in most need, mainly because they are a high disability group.

In Fort Smith, most spent their entire lives working at or near federal poverty thresholds. As you might expect, they lived **paycheck to paycheck**; renting as opposed to owning a home. 40% of Fort Smith is rental property. For most, owning a home was not only not an option, it was never a concept.

In a nutshell, they scraped to get by. And now here they are with no assets to fall back on.

In their working years, however, food was abundant and food cost was relatively cheap. Feeding themselves and their families was possible. Saving, not so much.

As they aged, paying their monthly budget was a struggle, but they did so without food insecurity.

Kids grew up and out; sometimes back in, and often times evolving into grandparents raising grandchildren. The Under-70 Senior was hardly financially prepared but would not say "no".

One-fourth of these Seniors were true laborers and ended up on disability care. They especially find themselves now still needing to rent. Every escalating cost and new cost categories continually chip away at the amount of money available for food.

The first expense to go is transportation and car insurance. And in turn, they turn to cabs, and transit systems, or a possible friend. This means, food portability is yet another new problem.

***Basically, Our Under-70 Seniors have created their own food deserts.*** They didn't march blindly into retirement; they simply had no choice. The lack of funds, raising the next generation, a lack of transportation, needing to shop small quantities and needing to shop close to home has isolated them.

The older "War Seniors" would do without, but the Under-70 Seniors have been dealing with a barrage of clever and unique marketing ploys that have weakened their savings resolve. We're talking about such things as: Rent to Own, Paycheck Advances, Reverse Mortgages, Burial Insurance Policies, Low interest and Zero Down financing. And also, rising late payment fees and penalties, overdraft charges, over credit limit fees, and rent to own landlords that cancel contracts

We were all upset when the housing bubble burst and hurt the middle and upper class, but all along, for the poor, there have been these "savings bursting bubbles"

This is not to make excuses, but merely to understand where we are and that circumstances cannot be undone.

Now, there is only room for Grace.

## CHILDREN

Children are, indeed, our future.

There is much to be done concerning not only food safety but improving food quality. I honestly think if they invented canned food today, it would never pass FDA approval.

Content labels are as small as a six font. What has the potential to harm you is generally at the last of the list. Often it's written sideways.

There are items required to be in bold print, like "Phenyl-Ala-nine" on a diet pop can. We see it in bold, but there is no explanation as to why or what potential harm exists. A good rule of thumb is that if you can't pronounce it, you shouldn't eat it.

We're marketing to children and so it is all about the front of the can or box. Labeling continues to fail to properly inform. A diet soda offers no fat, low salt, no carbs – that should be a good thing, then, right?

Why do we have such disregard for our nation's health? We can certainly do better than this.

We are complacent in raising these "Microwave Kids" who are fed overly processed and packaged foods. Even school nutrition programs and back pack programs can improve. Administrators are forced to put cost ahead of health, opting for overly processed and additive-laden food to drive down costs. It's not okay. How can at-risk clients be admonished for the foods they buy, when schools, agencies, food banks and others are just as guilty in providing unhealthy options.

We have to get kids excited about grocery store produce aisles, Farmers Markets, and community gardens. Why not a fun area in the produce dept.?

We have to get nutrition deeper into the curriculum, even if it's in the form of play. Telling children to "eat a rainbow of colors" is a good start.

## CHILDREN RAISED BY GRANPARENTS

I see a difference between the children raised by grandparents and the children raised by adults. I really get excited about getting nutritious food into multi-generation homes, because grandparents will cook and introduce these foods to their grandkids.

Kids raised at Grandma's House will eat nutritious foods of all kinds. But the child brought up by a younger parent simply will not.

Here's my hamburger test. At the pantry, should I grill a hamburger, a child raised by a grandparent will eat my deluxe burger with lettuce, tomato and onion on it. The child with a younger parent will pull it off the bun.

The child raised by a younger parent will eat carrot sticks, but only with low calorie Ranch Dressing added. This generation will eat anything with ranch dressing! These same kids would *never eat a carrot cooked in a stew*. Back at Grandma's House, that child will gladly eat it as they have become accustomed to these foods at an early age

In fact, children's eating patterns are established very early, in infancy and in early childhood, which is a major factor to consider

Hard-working younger parents, who also may be uncomfortable in the kitchen, for example, won't buy Gerber pureed spinach or meat for their infants -- ***but they will give them pudding and dairy!*** Why? Because they personally don't like meat and spinach products.

African Americans will introduce their children a lot earlier, often during their first year, to table foods prepared for an adult -- feeding the baby off the table. Is it any wonder that medical issues end up following later in life?

**We have to meet people at their level of understanding, build relationships and educate to change behavior.**

## FAMILIES

Adults are the mentors, the family is the unit. We have lost structure.

Families don't cook. Holding a couple of jobs. The microwave is cooking. Nutrition must be introduced in elementary schools though play. If you have a mock kitchen, and "spruce up" the components in a dish, they will learn good nutrition.

But even with nutritional education, there is a break. Getting knowledge into the home is essential. There is no money for the components, or the utensils to cook. I still think this is better than nothing, but getting this knowledge transferred into the home is essential.

The Older generation taught the next generation how to cook. That seems to have fallen by the wayside. Cooking classes began in the 60's but were dropped for more sophisticated classes. Maybe, these classes should have been transformed, not dropped.

The working poor are truly "working" poor. They work harder per earned dollar. No question. They more often than not rely on brawn. We're told from an early age to work smarter not harder, and understandably so. Hard work takes its toll.

But we must remember that America was founded with brawn. We have a crumbling infrastructure and as we seek to repair it, we must call for the equal compensation for brains and brawn.

Today's Office Mom, can easily take a break from her desk job and look up the perfect "fennel and Italian sausage penne pasta" recipe. The Mom working the McDonald's counter doesn't have the break to do that, nor the computer access to do it. When Office Mom is off work, she might be stressed, but she is hardly exhausted. McDonalds Mom, *is* exhausted and returns to a stressed home, if not a second job first. She could care less about fennel and sausage.

Dinner is quick and easy, for several reasons, but mainly because she's tired with few choices in the pantry anyway -- and her paycheck still a few days away.

So often when McDonalds Mom gets home, when it comes time to get something to feed the kids, they look for something close by. Something in their neighborhood for convenience. There is no Supercenter close to home. Hardly any gas in the car, anyway. The encumbrances to buying fresh products exist, but during the work week, food purchases are naturally about staying close to home.

Sixty may be the new 40, when you live life in an office environment; but 40 becomes the new 60 when you've broken your back making a living.

People standing in a pantry line, have restricted mobility, multiple medical issues, multi-system medical problems, and a lifetime of poor dental care. It's not all do to using drugs, as people are inclined to say. Teeth aren't missing because of drugs, but because community dental programs pull teeth as their primary care strategy. Appointments take 6 weeks and by the time that comes around, decay and infection has taken over.

Dinner at the table is an American tradition, like apple pie. Dinner table talks allow the family a higher level of bonding and institute a higher level of nutritious feeding habits.

## SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**With the bulk of hunger relief continuing to rest at the doorsteps of community pantries, nutritious foods must be sourced without its crippling cost.**

Agency-level hunger relief rests at the mercy of donated food products. All too often, these products consist of crackers, pop, cookies and other sugar items. The foods most needed to feed are the foods most elusive to obtain.

While food banks and Feeding America does their best to secure nutritious foods, they are similarly at the mercy and timing of donations.

Relying on any types of purchased food products that offer better nutritional support, breaks the bank of hunger relief agencies operating on a shoe-string budget.

**Hunger relief agencies require a sustaining level of support that they can count on from their food banking and Agribusiness counterparts.**

Produce sourcing should be an ongoing process. Produce availability should not be subject to the rejection standards of the grocery community.

An agricultural state such as Arkansas should have the overwhelming support and embrace of its farming community and its government.

Fort Smith should be developed as a food hub for West Central Arkansas and Eastern Oklahoma with the help of the USDA. Our area is “ripe” for Farm to Table initiatives. Such hubs stand as a ready source of large food donations.

### **Reward Good Giving**

The Sam Emerson Law that supports food donations is geared toward food recovery. It can be enhanced to provide incentives for “front haul” giving. Tyson Foods, for example, should be rewarded at or closer to fair sales value for product donations made direct from factory to food bank or agency.

**Building agency capacity is critical and economies of scale must be recognized and rewarded.**

The products most needed are perishable or require freezing. These products are generally shipped in bulk. When an agency cannot accept a full load, stop off truck deliveries can be coordinated to support several agencies.

Funding is likewise needed for the added overhead costs as a consequence.

**Solutions are Inter-disciplinary. Everyone in the pool! Stakeholders are abundant.**

Community Partnering is an integral component. Antioch and the food bank are embraced by local legislators, medical community, churches, church groups, community service organizations, the Fort Smith Public School System, the court system, TV and news media – both local and national, and even the U. S. Marshall’s Museum.

These partnerships have typically been more about raising awareness and garnering volunteers and fundraising remains problematic. All parties have a vested stake in reducing food insecurity.

**Solutions remain labor and cost intensive.**

Antioch’s Senior Mobile Pantry requires a great deal of hands on effort, which is a nice way of saying, it is hard work. Each month, Antioch delivers groceries to 2,350 seniors. It takes sourcing, warehousing, packaging, transporting and delivering approximately 40 pounds of food per person.

Still, demand always outweighs supply, especially relative to nutritious foods.

This summer, Antioch will offer, Antioch in the Park, a once a month mobile summer pantry for the public at large. We will bring food products to the park and encourage family outings. Again, the process is equally labor and cost intensive.

### **Nutritional Education is vital.**

Antioch and the food bank brings the importance of nutrition, health and wellness to our at-risk families through an annual fair event. We essentially offer a three-prong approach offering medical and dental support, nutritional education, and fun and fitness activities. Our medical and professional community join us to entertain and inform over 1,500 children and adults to make health benchmarking and cooking nutritiously on a budget family priorities.

No Kid Hungry's Cooking Matters at the Store programming has been warmly received in Fort Smith. Imagine, a simple \$10 grocery gift card brings hundreds to learning stations throughout a supermarket. We hope this program continues to find funding sources. We similarly welcome Cooking Matters classes to my hometown.

Public Schools should entertain offering nutritional education and financial solvency instruction at the earliest of ages.

### **We need to develop a new generation of Savers.**

We endorse federal government financed Children's Saving Accounts (CSA's). At the same time a birth certificate is created and a social security number is granted, a deposit is made. Such awards can be granted at the federal, state or private foundation level. Such accounts accrue with interest and pay at age 65.

Community financial partners must reward and encourage a savings mindset in our youth.

### **Neighborhoods are vital.**

While Fort Smith considers itself a city of neighborhoods, our neighborhoods increasingly grow unequal. The public schools in our at-risk neighborhoods continue to have the poorest facilities.

If anything, they should be rich. Our children spend more time at school than they do at home.

It stands to reason that our public schools have the potential to serve as a community oasis from the problems associated with poverty. They are the launching pads for education pursuits fueled by newfound dreams.

**To that same end, the hunger relief pantry also serves a purpose in youth development and mentoring.**

We create trust. What we can do as a result, is to spark dream catching, gain a more global perspective, help them to understand social responsibility and help them build personal character.

Hunger relief work remains a community catalyst. Besides meeting the need and creating economic worth, it's the intangible rewards that garner the most rewards. Remember the **unrealized benefits** in the work that we do as we attempt to solve food insecurity.

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