

National Commission on Hunger  
Testimony of Andy Souza, CEO Community Food Bank  
June 15, 2015 (Revised)

Thank you Commissioners for the opportunity to share a bit about hunger and its impact in California's Central Valley.

I have served as the CEO of Community Food Bank (CFB) for almost 5 years. Prior to joining CFB I worked for almost 25 years in local government for the City of Fresno, with the last 5 years as City Manager. I'll be drawing on both of these experiences in my presentation today.

The Community Food Bank serves the five southern counties of San Joaquin Valley: Fresno, Madera, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties, in the heart of central California. We are just east of Mr. Elliott-McCrea's service area, (across the Diablo Mountains). And while we have similar demographics in our service area there are some significant differences.

The five counties CFB serves had a combined crop value in 2013 of over \$25.3 billion, making it the richest agricultural region in the country and probably the world. Yet this same region is home to the cities with the second and third highest food hardship rates in the nation.

According to FRAC's 2014 Food Hardship study, Fresno was tied for second highest food hunger rate at 24.9% and Bakersfield (in Kern County) had the next highest rate at 24.3%. These are the two largest cities and have the strongest economies within our five counties, and yet one in four people reported food hardship in 2014.

We have arguably the highest concentration of hunger in the most fertile region of our county and the world. We also have childhood obesity rates that average between 40 and 45% in our five counties, with some rural areas reaching as high as 60%.

In addition to all of this, we are in the middle of a drought which has resulted in over 500,000 acres of farm land being taken out of production.

In our work to address the personal impact of what I've described, over the last three years we have doubled the amount of food we distribute to just under 40 million pounds and have more than doubled the number of people we serve, reaching over 280,000 people per month. Yet with all of this growth we are still reaching only 60 to 65% of the need for food assistance in our five counties.

The reason so many people need our assistance is not because there's not enough food to go around. Rather it's because there are significant barriers that stand between the roughly one fourth of our region's population who are facing food hardship. Barriers to the very food they see throughout our valley and in the fields where many of them are working.

These barriers fall into two broad categories:

- 1) Economic Barriers
- 2) Logistical/physical barriers

### **#1 Economic barriers:**

Our region has historically lagged behind the rest of California and the nation, in economic wellbeing. Our unemployment rates are consistently 50% or more higher than the rest of California and are almost twice the national average. The latest numbers I found show our region hovering between 11 and 12 percent while California was at 7.8% and the U.S. was at 6.3%.

We are also seeing a significant increase in underemployment, with people re-entering the workplace at lower wages and with less than fulltime work.

### **#2 Physical or logistical access to food:**

There's an adage from my city hall days that rings true throughout our region..."Retail follows rooftops". The lack of rooftops in many of our communities, coupled with lower earnings in these communities means no access to grocery stores or supermarkets.

As an example, Fresno County is over 6,000 square miles in size and has 60% of its population living in a metropolitan area of less than 180 square miles. That means 40% of the population is spread out over the remaining 5,800 square miles.

Additionally, many of the families we serve cannot afford adequate transportation for themselves and public transportation is very lacking in these rural areas. It is very difficult for many of them can't physically get to where the food is even as they see it or work it in their communities.

### **Recommendation:**

My recommendation to the Commission, as it relates to improving food access for migrant families, is to look at approaches which have worked when facing similar issues. For example, Empowerment Zones were put into place to provide tax incentives for economically distressed communities, and the Community Reinvestment Act, was put into place to combat the economic redlining of certain communities by encouraging depository institutions to help meet the credit needs of these communities. Both of these programs provide a framework that could be used to addressing the hunger related needs of migrant families in economically distressed rural areas.

In 2000, the City of Fresno's Redevelopment Agency worked with a local developer to construct a super market in the middle of what was at that time the largest food desert in Fresno County. The project was a combination of public incentives and private investment, very similar to the principles of the Empowerment Zones and Community Reinvestment Act, and is still flourishing today.

As we have seen, it will take some form of a public/private partnership to make the economics work to bring these types of stores to the rural parts of our County. And without these types of stores, the migrant families we are serving will continue to lack access to the variety of healthy foods needed to address the many hunger and nutrition issues they are facing.