

## Hunger Commission Testimony

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. The New Mexico Association of Food Banks (NMAFB) serves five regional food banks and a network of more than 400 agencies covering all 33 New Mexico counties. Currently, the main function of the association is to acquire and distribute fresh produce. Last fiscal year, our network distributed almost 10 million pounds of produce through our acquisition and food rescue programs.

To start with, let me give you some facts about New Mexico:

New Mexico is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest state in terms of land mass (121,589 square miles). In contrast, we are 36<sup>th</sup> in population (with a population of just over 2,000,000). That translates to just over 17 people per square mile. So, if you're looking for wide open spaces, New Mexico is the state for you. But that large size and spread out population creates some challenges in the emergency food area...

Outside of the interstate corridors (I-25, I-40 and I-10), it is not uncommon to have a 40 to 60 mile drive to reach a full service grocery store (and in some areas the drive is even longer). Catron County, located in western New Mexico, doesn't have a single grocery store in the entire county. These factors result in a large number of "food deserts" around the state. Couple the "food deserts" with the fact that New Mexico is an actual desert, with limited large scale agriculture, and you can see the scope of our food acquisition and distribution challenge.

In addition, the large geographic area and sparse population creates "health care deserts" with large sections of the population having limited access to medical facilities and resources. That, along with other factors, leads to a high incidence of diabetes, heart disease, and childhood obesity.

Our next challenge is limited employment options, including, but not limited to:

- Very few corporate employment bases – those that do exist are mainly on the I-25 corridor

- A large number of jobs that traditionally pay higher wages are in cyclical industries like mining, oil & gas, and agriculture. This can result in seasonal layoffs or sudden increases in unemployment which places a great strain on support network resources (in recent years, there was a mining layoff in southern New Mexico that resulted in more than 20% of the workforce facing immediate unemployment).

Now, I'd like to share a little about how New Mexico food banks and their agencies are working to combat the challenges we face:

Mobile Pantries have dramatically expanded our outreach to rural areas and allow food banks to target specific geographic areas or populations.

Our increased emphasis on fresh produce and healthier foods is allowing us to work on combating chronic medical issues within the populations that we serve.

Some of our food banks are developing child hunger initiatives that look at ways to approach hunger from a holistic, community perspective. One of those pilot projects is at East San Jose Elementary School in Albuquerque. There, rather than just relying on backpacks of food going home with children, the food bank is working with the school and community partners like Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Mexico and Community Dental to provide healthcare and social services when families come to mobile pantry distributions at the school. This program recently expanded to include cooking demonstrations from local chefs to teach families how to cook.

Our Hunger & Health Initiative is looking for ways food banks and agencies can partner with health care providers on programs to address the impact of hunger on general health and specific health conditions. Promedica, in partnership with Presbyterian Healthcare, recently did a presentation on their health hunger initiatives which include: hunger assessment questions as part of standard health screenings in their hospitals and clinics; a “healthy” grocery store in low income Ohio neighborhood; and child health programs directed at combating childhood obesity by instilling healthy habits in school age children while providing support services to their parents.

Since we believe that low income/unemployment is the largest contributor to hunger in families, our members are looking for ways to address the issue beyond the traditional role of advocating for living wages. One of our member food banks, Roadrunner Food Bank, has developed a job training program where low risk offenders coming out of the prison system are trained for warehouse certification and commercial driving licenses. Successful program participants leave the training equipped to either work in a warehouse setting or licensed for commercial driving (both well paying jobs in the private and non-profit sector).

But in spite of those programs and the work of others in the emergency food sector, we continue to struggle to keep up with needs and areas are still being underserved. In the interest of time, I will focus on two of those today:

While New Mexico has placed a great deal of emphasis on the issue of childhood hunger, and many different groups are working to address the needs of children and have worked to increase access to school based feeding programs, the most recent

Feeding America data shows that 78% of the children eligible for school food programs are falling through the cracks and not being served in the summer.

Between 2010 and 2014, New Mexico saw the number of people over sixty needing food assistance increase from 13% to 21%. That number is even higher for those living in rural areas where there is limited access to home delivery meals or congregate meal sites.

Based on those two factors and others that time does not allow me to mention, New Mexico food banks make the following recommendations:

1. Expand programs that focus on providing employment opportunities and support the establishment of a living wage. Good employment is the most direct route to ending hunger.
2. Support retailers and food suppliers in their efforts to develop and experiment with other food distribution models for rural areas. In New Mexico, we have a local wholesaler that has developed a distribution model that can be successful in areas with as little as 300 people. We have also had some success with the MoGro mobile grocery store model. Providing incentives to encourage creativity will create more solutions for rural access challenges.
3. Rural states like New Mexico need more support and emphasis placed on establishing an affordable, reliable broad band network. As more and more programs rely on electronic systems, all New Mexicans deserve equal access.
4. Continue to support SNAP. It is a program with a proven track record of success in reducing food insecurity. Any cuts to SNAP will have an immediate and dramatic impact on the number of hungry people, and the food bank system can't be expected to continue to absorb the increases.
5. Encourage states to do SNAP outreach. There are still large numbers of eligible people in New Mexico and around the country that don't take advantage of SNAP. In addition, encourage states to continue to fully utilize existing waivers. In New Mexico, we are very concerned that pending implementation of work, training, or volunteer requirements for parents of school age children, teens, and adults aged 50-60 will be a significant hardship for up to 70,000 New Mexicans. Again, a major concern is that rural New Mexicans will be hardest hit trying to comply with additional requirements to keep their SNAP benefits.
6. Allow programs like summer feeding sites more flexibility. While hunger exists in every county in New Mexico, not every county looks the same. A one size fits all congregate meal model doesn't allow agencies and program administrators to implement programs that meet the needs of their constituents. What works for a

site in Albuquerque may not be optimal for a rural location. For example, in a rural state like New Mexico, families may have to travel long distances to reach a summer meal site. The roundtrip fuel costs can outweigh the cost of the one lunch their child receives. Parental work schedules may also make it difficult for children to get to sites multiple times per week. Allowing families to take food home to minimize the number of trips they have to make, creating supplemental food boxes for families, and expanding the summer EBT program are potential solutions to help reach families that don't have access to consistent food during the summer months. (Please note that these recommendations also apply to congregate meal sites for seniors.)

Thank you again for this opportunity to tell you about New Mexico, and thank you for the time and energy that you are giving to this community input process.