

**Testimony for the National Commission on Hunger**  
**Kristen Miale, Good Shepherd Food Bank**  
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Dr. Mariana Chilton, Co-chair  
Robert Doar, Co-chair  
National Commission on Hunger

Dr. Chilton, Mr. Doar, members of the National Commission on Hunger:

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to testify before you today. My name is Kristen Miale. I have worked for Good Shepherd Food Bank for five years, and have served as the president of the organization for the past 3 years. I became involved in this work after over 10 years working in the finance sector. I started as a volunteer and immediately was drawn to the work after seeing two things in particular, the magnitude of the problem and the amount of unhealthy food being distributed to people who have vulnerable health systems – and little to no access to healthcare. And I wanted to be part of the solution, knowing that there are many, many people in our state and in our country who believe hunger is solvable, and as a nation who has the resources to end hunger. Since then, I have worked with my colleagues at Good Shepherd Food Bank to change the role of the food bank from distributing empty calories, to working with partners to improve access to healthy food for Mainers in need.

Good Shepherd Food Bank is a statewide hunger relief organization and the only food bank serving the entire state of Maine. We work with over 400 ending hunger partners across the state, including food pantries, meal sites, shelters, community centers, and schools, serving approximately 178,000 unique individuals each year, including over 50,000 children. We are also the warehousing partner for the TEFAP and CSFP programs of the USDA, as well as a sponsor for five summer feeding sites.

Over the past twelve months, Good Shepherd Food Bank and its network of hunger-relief partners distributed over 23 million pounds of food to Mainers in need, more than a third of this food is fresh produce. In response to the high rates of food insecurity in the state, we have doubled our distribution in the past 5 years. We're focusing more of our resources on sourcing and distributing nutritious food, because we know that our clients will be much healthier if they are consuming foods that nourish their bodies and minds, instead of foods that contribute to poor health and perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

We want to be very clear that we're very proud of our work and the work of our dedicated hunger-relief programs. But we also want to be clear that food banks cannot and should not be the solution to hunger in America. The charitable network should not be viewed as the vehicle for feeding the millions of Americans who experience food insecurity each month. Food is a basic human need and something that all families should have access to at all times, without

having to continuously rely on charitable organizations. We will not solve this problem by simply having more food drives.

### **The nature of the problem**

Good Shepherd Food Bank's network serves clients of all demographics. Fifty-four percent of our clients are children (under 18) and seniors (over 60). Families facing food insecurity in Maine are making excruciating decisions every day – do I pay for my medication or do I buy food? Do I heat my home or do I buy food? Do I buy my child the shoes he needs or do I buy food? The daily stress caused by these tradeoffs contributes to the ongoing nature of poverty and food insecurity. The barriers to financial stability are insurmountable for many families.

We know from recent research that our network's patrons make nearly 2 million visits to their local hunger relief agencies each year – on average, this means a person is visiting a food pantry about once a month. What was once an emergency response to a family's sudden food crisis is no longer the role of hunger-relief programs; people are experiencing a chronic, ongoing need for support getting the nutritious food required to live a healthy, productive life.

And beyond the numbers, I want to share with you some things I've seen and heard over my short time doing this work. I've heard of seniors at a food pantry discussing how if you put cat food on a saltine, it makes it easier to get it down. I've seen mothers put soda in baby bottles and sippy cups because they can't afford milk and water doesn't make the crying stop. I've heard from dentists that they see children whose new teeth come in already decaying. I've heard clients tell us that if it weren't for their food pantry, they wouldn't have any fresh vegetables. We have staff who have witnessed a mother coming three times to a food pantry only to stop at the door and turn around, yet finally, on the fourth try, finally able to swallow her pride to open the door. I am frequently asked by people, "how do you know the people you serve are really in need"? And my response is always "have you ever been to a food pantry?" "Have you ever talked with someone using a food pantry?"

### **The charitable network - an unsustainable solution**

Our network is comprised mainly of small programs operating in borrowed space with a dedicated but aging volunteer force. Each year we see pantries within our network scramble to fill the void when free or nearly-free space is no longer available or when a key volunteer moves, retires, or dies. In addition, volunteering across the food pantry network is much more episodic; it's very difficult to find a volunteer who is able and willing to dedicate many hours a week leading a program and completing the many tasks – large and small – of food pantry work, including locating and obtaining food, managing, scheduling, and training volunteers, fundraising, and building community support. This system is extremely susceptible to sudden changes that can influence the food security of whole communities, and we have grown too reliant on a vulnerable model of hunger-relief to address a problem that is only growing in size and complexity.

Even well-staffed and well-supported food pantries are not the solution to ending hunger. The best food pantries in our network strive to make the experience as positive as possible for

patrons, including having flexible open times to fit more schedules and offering patrons the ability to choose the food their family will eat. Even so, the system requires people to put aside their shame and embarrassment and sit with a stranger to answer personal questions that “justify” their need for food assistance. The process of seeking help from a food pantry – even the best food pantry – inherently deprives people of their dignity. We feel no one should have to stand in a line with an empty box, waiting to receive charity food.

The Food Bank and our network of partners are doing what we can; we are sourcing more food and, more importantly, more healthy food than ever before and we're partnering with other community based programs, such as health centers and schools, to deliver services with fewer barriers and a better client experience. But it's still not enough.

The Feeding America network of food banks has continued to grow and invest in programs to improve our impact on hunger. Good Shepherd has doubled our impact in just the past five years. And yet, food insecurity remains as significant a problem as ever. If the charitable food network was going to solve hunger, we would have. We will not food bank our way out of this crisis.

We are the safety net underneath the safety net of the government response to poverty. When it comes to fighting hunger, the most vital federal programs are SNAP and the school nutrition programs. Every time gaps are created in these programs, we feel it. We know that 35% of the people we serve earn too much money to qualify for any assistance and for those who do qualify, the amount is often not enough to cover their needs. The charitable food network cannot begin to replace what SNAP does, both in terms of magnitude of resources as well as quality of service. SNAP allows millions of families to have a low barrier, dignified source of food and annually, SNAP lifts 3 million households out of poverty.

### **Recommendations – holistic solutions to poverty**

At its root, hunger in America is a symptom of poverty. With stable employment, adequate income, and access to needed resources, a family will be food secure. Therefore the question should not be how do we address hunger, but rather how do we address poverty. The answer must lie with helping families achieve long term financial stability, so they can provide for their needs, including enough nutritious food to live healthy lives. We believe this needs to be done holistically and systemically. The solution needs to encompass: living wages, affordable housing, affordable child care, affordable quality health care (including mental health care), and access to quality education and nutritious food. We need policy makers to put the health of our children ahead of the influence of food companies. We need a farm bill that supports a \$0.99 salad instead of a \$0.99 hamburger or a \$0.79 liter of soda.

There is no silver bullet here – no single program that will solve hunger in America. As a nation, we must dedicate ourselves to eradicating poverty. Until we do that, children across our country will go to bed hungry every night.

I would also like to touch briefly on a gap in knowledge we feel should be addressed by this commission. While the USDA conducts a yearly survey on household food security in the United States, this data is not as useful as it could be. The methodology depends on people self-reporting that they are experiencing food insecurity, which makes the results very subjective and likely underestimates the problem. It also doesn't differentiate between whether a household is food secure through their own resources or is food secure because of support from a hunger-relief program or government assistance programs. It's impossible to know what progress is being made if we don't even know our baseline. Another gap is the lack of longitudinal data on how hunger impacts someone's physical, mental, and emotional health over a lifetime. If we can't measure the problem, how are we going to fix it?

And lastly, what we need more than anything is compassion for the poor and leadership and the political will to recognize and commit ourselves to solving the problem of poverty. We are the only developed nation that blames poverty on the poor. We need to stop wasting resources on trying to determine if someone is worthy of receiving help and instead focus on finding real solutions to the problem.

Thank you very much for your time.