

## Kathy Webb Testimony Hunger Commission Public Hearing

Good morning. Thank you for being here and for allowing me to speak briefly about hunger in AR. I've had the privilege of serving as the Executive Director of the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance for three years. Over the course of the 20 years prior to this, I was in the restaurant business, in area management positions with two national chains, and as an independent operator. During my time, I became interested in the issue of hunger, in all the ways it affects a person's life. I served on the boards of the AR Foodbank and the Hunger Relief Alliance, and when elected to the Arkansas Legislature in 2006, I co-founded the AR Legislative Hunger Caucus. We were the first state to have such a caucus, and I'm proud of current legislators like Rep. Charlotte Vining Douglas, who continue to lead the fight to alleviate hunger.

As the Executive Director of the Alliance, I see the breadth and depth of hunger throughout the state. Hunger exists in every ZIP code; it affects every age group, from seniors, to working families, to children.

The Alliance has been working to reduce food insecurity in Arkansas for 10 years. I think Dr. Craig Gunderson best expresses what we do in his five ways to alleviate hunger: we procure food for emergency food assistance to distribute through the state's Feeding America food bank network, provide SNAP outreach, advocate for policies that benefit hungry Arkansans, offer empowerment programs that help families learn financial management, and work to promote other USDA programs. This morning, I'll focus on our work connecting kids to other USDA programs, that has been a core component of our programmatic work for the last few years. Our goal is to end childhood hunger statewide, through the No Kid Hungry campaign, in partnership with Share Our Strength.

When we started the No Kid Hungry campaign in 2010, we had the unenviable distinction of being ranked #1 in childhood food insecurity. There are a lot of lists I want to be #1 on – being home to the most hungry kids in the nation is not one of them.

The No Kid Hungry campaign is focused on breaking down barriers between the federal nutrition programs and the kids they were meant to serve.

In five years, we have made tremendous progress. There are a lot of numbers behind our success like:

- more than 400 schools have made breakfast part of the school day due to grants and technical assistance we have provided
- 12,000 more children eating school breakfast every day
- 7.7 million afterschool meals served and

- more than 5,000 families empowered to shop smarter and cook healthier through hands-on nutrition education.

Each one of those numbers has taken a lot of work. And the key to being successful has been an incredibly strong public-private partnership between state agencies, legislators, the Governor's office, other nonprofits and corporate partners like Tyson Food, Walmart, and the Midwest Dairy Association. Each one of the organizations who sit around our collaborating table is invested in building a stronger future for our kids.

But despite this deep investment, one particular area of challenge is making sure hungry kids get the meals they need over the summer.

For many kids, summer vacation means bike rides, swimming pools, family vacations and hanging out with friends. But for millions of low-income kids, summer is the hungriest time of year. When I ask an 8-year old girl how she likes her meal, and her response is "I'm just happy to have a meal" I find that both heart-breaking and unacceptable.

In Arkansas, more than 294,000 children rely on free or reduced-price school meals during the school year to meet their nutritional needs. When the school year ends, these meals end as well.

We have been working in unprecedented ways to combat summer hunger. We brought critical assistance and resources to the schools and community organizations that serve meals during the summer. We've collaborated with the USDA, state agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private investors to set goals, address barriers to success, and measure progress. We've put every idea to the test and every dollar to work, trying a wide variety of new tactics to address summer hunger within the current federal rules and regulations.

Some of these innovations include:

- Collaborative Planning. We work closely with state agencies, developing common goals and coordinating efforts on the ground, like sharing real-time data about site applications, which allows the campaign to assist in the recruitment process.
- Targeted Site and Sponsor Recruitment. We've invested additional resources and outreach capacity in areas with low program participation, working through local champions to build relationships and test innovative strategies to add new summer meals sites.
- Small Grants. To help overcome barriers that stopped sites from serving more kids, we've provided grants to purchasing coolers or small kitchen equipment to support mobile feeding.

All of this work led to a huge win in the summer of 2013. Statewide, Arkansas sponsors served an additional 1.6 million meals that summer, the #1 increase in the nation. That's a ranking we can be proud of! But it's incremental success. It's not enough to meet the need. Three-quarters of low-income children across the state are still left without healthy meals provided through the summer meals program because the law constrains the program in ways that prevent Arkansas, and every other state, from meeting demand.

Largest among these barriers is the "congregate feeding requirement," which dictates that children must travel to a central location and eat their meals at a specific time in a specific setting. In some places, this requirement works well. Kids are able to gather and eat healthy meals in safe, interactive environments, like at Life Skills for Youth in SWLR, where they served over 25,000 breakfast and lunch meals last summer. But it doesn't work in some other places, like a site in SW Arkansas, where 200 kids get a summer meal, but because of transportation costs, 800 more who are eligible don't.

This one-size-fits-all regulation makes it extremely difficult to reach most hungry children in Arkansas and across the country. I'd like to highlight a few key reasons why:

- First, poverty has spread to diverse locations in Arkansas. The same is true nationally; suburban and rural poverty is becoming increasingly common. The number of suburban poor, according to a study from The Brookings Institution, living in distressed neighborhoods has grown by 139 percent—almost three times the pace of growth in cities, in the last 10 years. Open summer meal sites are only available in areas of concentrated need, where more than 50 percent of children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. This means more than 35,000 low-income children in Arkansas miss out simply because they live in mixed-income communities, which are ineligible to operate open summer sites.
- Second, it's often impossible for kids to get to sites. In rural areas of Arkansas, sites are usually located in the closest town, where there is a church or community center, but those towns can be 10 or even 15 miles away from where a family might live. We witnessed this in Pine Bluff, where the congregate feeding requirement is limiting summer meal providers from reaching children beyond their immediate neighborhood.
- Third, sites close if enough kids are unable to come. Even when new sites came to underserved areas, the constraints around congregate feeding and lack of transportation prevented many kids from accessing summer meals. As a result, many of the sites located in rural communities in Arkansas found it financially infeasible to stay open due to low participation and lack of flexibility in how they provide meals to children.

- Fourth, meal providers face an incredible administrative burden. They must complete separate applications and juggle different enrollment time periods for summer and afterschool programs. Streamlining the red tape would make these programs operate more seamlessly to provide meals year-round.

As a result of these barriers, only 22 percent of eligible children in the state are successfully getting the meals they need when school is out of session. That's unacceptable.

It's time to improve the way we feed kids in the summertime.

Right now Congress is considering the reauthorization of child nutrition programs. This is a critical time to ensure our voices are heard and Congress takes action to help feed more children in the summertime. By giving communities more options and building more flexibility into the summer meals program, we can make the program run more effectively and efficiently in our cities, suburbs and rural communities.

With these improvements, we would be able to feed more hungry kids in Arkansas, no matter where they live.

By connecting more kids to the food they need, we are building a smarter, stronger, healthier generation. We are unlocking their potential to become the next CEO, engineer, professor, innovator, athlete, or small business owner. We are helping to break the cycle of poverty and create a stronger, more competitive job market.

Our goal is to end childhood hunger in Arkansas – we can. But we need to see these critical improvements to the summer meals program to get the job done.