



Partners *for a*
Hunger-Free Oregon

Ending hunger before it begins.

To: National Commission on Hunger
From: Matt Newell-Ching, Public Affairs Director, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon
RE: Recommendations to reduce Hunger in Oregon and America
Date: June 15, 2015

“I have noticed that many people in the United States think that mass hunger and poverty are immutable facts of life. They may volunteer at a soup kitchen or contribute to an international charity, but do not hope for large-scale change. They are often wary of getting involved in politics. For most of my life, many people thought that racial oppression was an immutable fact of life in South Africa... You can certainly overcome mass hunger in the United States... Your country is so richly blessed.”

-Archbishop Desmond Tutu, 2010

Few things connect our basic humanity like food. Food is foundational for life.

Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon envisions living in a thriving nation where everyone has access to healthy, culturally-appropriate food.

We can end hunger in America. Knowing that we can do this is both deeply hopeful and deeply frustrating.

It is hopeful because we have the resources. There is not only enough food in America to feed everyone, there is enough food in the world to feed everyone on planet earth.

It is frustrating because despite this possibility, our nation’s “very low food security” rate (herein “hunger”) has nearly doubled in the last 15 years. In 1999, the nation’s hunger rate was 3 percent. In 2013, it was 5.6 percent.

We can and must do better.

Summary and Key Recommendations

In the late 1990s, Oregon had the worst hunger rate in America. We took meaningful steps that reduced our hunger rate by nearly one-third. This was remarkable. We did this in large part by maximizing the toolbox provided by the laws guiding national nutrition programs, such as SNAP. Through policy changes at the state level, such as increasing child care tax credits and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and by building creative partnerships between nonprofits and state agencies to connect eligible Oregonians with nutrition

programs, we were able to hold the line on hunger when the Great Recession hit the hardest

Our experience also shows us that large-scale change to reduce and eventually end hunger would require significant additional investments to nutrition programs, as well as meaningful investments in addressing the root causes of hunger.

Our recommendations to end hunger in America include the following:

- Modernize the way SNAP is calculated by moving from the outdated Thrifty Food Plan to the Low Cost Food Plan.
- Reduce child hunger by providing every family in America with a school-aged child eligible for free or reduced-price lunch the opportunity to participate in the Summer EBT for Children (SEBTC).
- Increase access to fresh, healthy food by offering matching funding for fruits and vegetables administered through EBT cards.
- Align rules for out-of-school-time nutrition programs (CACFP and SFSP).
- States should participate in economy-boosting options within SNAP such as expanding categorical eligibility and eliminating asset tests.
- USDA should encourage state agencies to partner with nonprofits and businesses to raise awareness of federal nutrition programs to people who may be eligible.
- Provide additional flexibility for accessing nutrition programs for American Indian communities.
- Address the root causes of hunger by promoting family economic stability and pathways to the middle class, including:
 - Invest work supports such as EITC, housing and child care.
 - Invest in evidence-based early childhood interventions that help kids escape poverty as adults.
 - Add family wage jobs to our nation's economy work by creating conditions for job creation and restoring the purchasing power of the minimum wage by increasing it and indexing it to inflation.
 - End our nation's shameful era of mass incarceration that exacerbates poverty and disproportionately sends people of color to prison unfairly.

Who is Hungry in Oregon?

The overwhelming majority of Oregon's households experiencing hunger fall into one of the following categories:

- In the labor market (39 percent working, 15 percent unemployed but looking);
- People with disabilities (23 percent);
- Retirees (10 percent).

In total, these make up eight out of every nine hungry households in Oregon.

Moreover, one in eight households experiencing hunger in Oregon have someone who has served in active duty in the military.

We urge this commission to stand up for these families and recommend bold solutions.

How Did Oregon Reduce Hunger in the early-2000's?

In the late 1990s, Oregon had the highest hunger rate in the nation. Over the next several years, a collaboration of lawmakers, state agencies, and nonprofits, through the Oregon Hunger Task Force, took bold steps to address hunger in Oregon.

It worked. Oregon's hunger rate dropped from 5.2 percent (1999-2001) to 3.7 percent (2002-2004). This came at a time when national hunger rates increased from 3.1 percent to 3.6 percent. In other words, over a three-year period *during the Great Recession*, hunger in Oregon reduced by nearly one-third while it increased nationwide.

What explains this? We attribute increased participation in SNAP as the primary driver of this reduction. In 1999, there were around 109,000 SNAP cases per month. By the end of 2004, that number was up to 218,000. The higher participation rate was driven by increased outreach by DHS and nonprofits and a simplified application and eligibility process through opting into "categorical eligibility."

Other factors that may have driven the hunger rate down include the passage of a state refundable child tax credit, a state refundable Earned Income Tax Credit, the expansion of emergency food services, new programs to connect seniors with farmers markets, and expanded efforts to connect kids with meals during the summer.

In essence, Oregon worked to maximize what was allowable under federal programs, fostered strong public-private partnerships and enacted policy measures on a statewide level to supplement federal programs.

The Great Recession caused the hunger rate to increase in Oregon, just as it had nationwide. Our hunger rate has risen to 6.1 percent (2011-2013) - the national rate is 5.7 percent. This is still far too high. Yet Oregon's hunger rank relative to other states has stayed relatively constant since our improvement in the early 2000s, suggesting that the changes made during that time were lasting.

More recent data suggest that things may be improving, albeit slowly. The rate of food hardship – the percentage of Oregonians reporting they did not have enough money to buy food in the last year – fell from a Great Recession-high of 20 percent (2010) to 15 percent (2014). While this is only one data point, we hope this is a sign of good things to come.

Our Recommendations to the Commission

We appreciate the opportunity to present ideas to reduce and eliminate hunger in America, and put forth the following ideas:

The SNAP Benefit Calculation is Wildly Unrealistic – Let's Fix It

The SNAP benefit is calculated based on USDA's "Thrifty Food Plan." A more accurate moniker would be the "highly unrealistic assumptions food plan."

Some of the problematic assumptions in the TFP include:

- No special dietary needs for any members of the household;
- A lack of food variety recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans;
- The ability and time to shop at multiple grocery stores to find deals that may or may not exist.

We should not be surprised to learn, therefore, that a typical family on SNAP runs out of benefits about three weeks into the month.

We recommend shifting from the TFP to the “Low Cost Food Plan,” which is based on more realistic assumptions for the realities of low-income families juggling difficult demands. In addition to significantly reducing hunger, this would boost the economy and create jobs, particularly in rural areas underserved because of lack of purchasing power from customers. For every SNAP dollar spent, the economy is boosted by \$1.79.

Reducing Child Hunger in the Summer is Actually Quite Easy

Kids should spend summer break playing outside, not worrying about whether there’s food in the fridge.

Yet we know the latter is the sad and unnecessary reality for too many kids in Oregon and across America. In the summer months, school-aged children lack access to meals in school. Ideally, children who receive lunch in schools would have access to summer meal programs, which almost always offer enriching activities in addition to meals. Only 15 percent of kids who participate in school meals, however, also participate in summer meal programs.

Six states – including Oregon – have been participating in a pilot project in recent years aimed at reducing child hunger during the summer. And it’s working.

The idea behind the Summer Electronic Benefits for Children (SEBTC) program is simple: provide a modest \$30 per month EBT allotment for each school-aged child eligible for school meals. Evaluations have consistently shown that in participating households, SEBTC reduced child hunger by one third..

An idea with this level of success deserves to be expanded. Our nation could make a serious dent in child hunger by expanding SEBTC nationwide.

Other ways we can reduce hunger in the summer months is by better aligning out-of-school-time programs – particularly the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). These programs have different rules that make it confusing, particularly for providers who want to participate in both programs but who must operate under different sets of rules for each program. We can also allow additional providers to participate by lowering the threshold of area eligibility for both programs from 50 percent to 40 percent of kids eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

Healthy Incentives for SNAP

A major barrier to healthy eating for SNAP recipients is the cost of healthy food. A pilot program in Massachusetts, which matched 30 cents to a dollar for targeted fruits and vegetables at grocery stores, showed significant increases in the consumption of fruits and vegetables for participating families.

We recommend exploring higher incentive levels (for example, 50 cents or \$1 match) for households on SNAP in further pilot projects. The experience of Massachusetts also teaches us that it isn't a wise use of resources to begin a project with this level of sophistication only to end it a year later. This was a frustration in Massachusetts for grocers (who invested significant time and logistics), SNAP recipients (who were just getting used to the program when it ended), and taxpayers (who saw this pilot spend only 6 percent of the total project cost on benefits).

We believe further pilots drawing from the experience of Massachusetts are warranted.

Incentive programs through WIC and Senior "Farm Direct" are popular programs that connect clients with healthy, local food at farmer's markets. Funding for these programs should be expanded so that every client that wants to participate can do so. In Oregon, only one-quarter of seniors participate due to lack of adequate funding. USDA can also continue to provide technical assistance to markets and vendors to increase access to these programs in as many communities as possible.

Maximizing What's in the Current Toolbox

Oregon's decision to opt into categorical eligibility, as well as the effective public-private partnerships aimed at decreasing barriers to SNAP, directly led to a reduction in Oregon's hunger rate in the early 2000s.

These efforts are replicable. We believe it is in every state's interest to choose these options in an effort to reduce hunger. USDA should choose to conduct and encourage SNAP outreach to the highest degree possible.

The Value of Cross-Sector Collaboration

A question was asked during oral testimony about the value of cross-sector collaboration in efforts to end hunger. A paper published in the journal *Food, Culture, and Society* (2012) entitled *Food Insecurity in Western U.S. States* explores ways that states including Oregon have forged effective partnerships between nonprofits and state agencies. The bottom line is that state agencies and advocates working together can be a highly effective tool in addressing hunger, and these partnerships are replicable.

Addressing the Root Causes of Hunger and Poverty

While beyond the scope of this commission, we would be remiss not to address solutions to the root causes of poverty and hunger. While not exhaustive, we believe the following solutions must be considered in any serious plan to reduce hunger and poverty.

First and foremost is that while our economy shows signs of recovery, we are not adding family-wage jobs at the pace necessary to make a dent in hunger or poverty. The nation's

minimum wage should be increased and tied to inflation. Public works projects such as investing in our nation's infrastructure should be pursued. Where unnecessary, regulations should be modified or removed to create conditions for job creation.

Access to higher education is a huge barrier to family economic stability. The largest group of people experiencing hunger were ones with a high school diploma, but not any additional credentials (such as an associate's degree). This suggests that increasing access to college at any level is worth pursuing. Ideas such as tuition-free community college and other forms of higher education should be pursued.

The lack of affordable housing continues to cause impossible choices for families, such as forcing families to choose between housing and food. Oregon has a high rate of households that spend more than 50 percent of their income on rent. Increasing the supply of affordable housing should be one of our nation's top priorities.

Our nation's policy choices that have caused mass incarceration – at the highest rate of any nation in the industrialized world – must be ended. The “war on drugs” specifically has failed. While drug use is consistent across socioeconomic strata, our nation's drug enforcement has disproportionately targeted poor communities and communities of color. Ex-offenders often face a de facto life sentence of poverty after they have paid their debts to society, facing significant barriers to employment and a second chance. Mandatory minimum sentences should be repealed. We should choose building drug treatment centers rather than more prisons. We applaud an emerging bipartisan consensus that the policies that have led to mass incarceration have not worked, and we urge solutions.

Refundable tax credits, such as EITC and the Child Tax Credit (CTC), support work and provide effective pathways to the middle class for low-income families. Millions of people are lifted out of poverty each year because of these credits. Congress should permanently extend current levels for EITC and the CTC, which are set to expire at the end of 2017.

The definition of the poverty level is stuck in the era of Mad Men. Updating the poverty level from an antiquated 1960s formula is long overdue. A calculation should reflect the realities of the cost of life's basic necessities such as food, housing, utilities, health care and reliable transportation. It should also take into account regional differences in the cost of living.

Finally, aggressive investments in early childhood should be pursued. Emerging research shows that the “first 1,000 days” from conception to a child's second birthday are crucial to a child's long-term potential for success, and can be a predictor of whether a child can escape poverty as an adult. We should invest in support for young parents, such as affordable access to high-quality childcare and preschool, paid family medical leave, WIC and other work supports that provide stability for low-income families.

Conclusion

A thought experiment: What if we could measure hunger prior to SNAP becoming a national program in the early 1970's? How high do you think the hunger rate would have been?

We only started measuring hunger and food insecurity in the 1990s. The hunger rate prior to SNAP would undoubtedly be much higher than current levels today. When SNAP became a national program, did it cut hunger in half? By two-thirds?

While the exact level is unknowable, we do know that SNAP did eradicate the worst forms of starvation and extreme malnutrition in America. SNAP is now one of our nation's most successful federal programs. It is the first line of defense against hunger, and its error rates are at historic lows.

And while SNAP significantly continues to reduce hunger in America relative to world without SNAP, our national hunger rate is now near 5.6 percent. The question we have to ask ourselves is: Are we okay with six percent? Why have we stopped there?

What would a SNAP program look like that would get us from 5.6 percent to zero? How can we create conditions so that more people can purchase food without needing SNAP or other food assistance?

Those are the great questions before us, and we urge this commission's bold recommendations to end hunger in our time.