



**Capital Area Food Bank
Hunger Report Launch – June 17, 2021
Radha Muthiah, President and CEO – Remarks**

“Welcome to the Capital Area Food Bank and to the launch of the Hunger Report 2021. We’re so pleased to finally be able to be in person again, though of course we welcome the new hybrid approach that is enabling others to join us via Zoom as well. The fact that we’re here together is such a promising sign that the upheaval and challenges of the last 15 months are finally turning a corner. And that is a welcome relief.

What we are also here to share today, though, is that while things are looking better for many of us, they are not getting back to normal for everyone. For those whose financial stability was rocked by the pandemic, this has been a time of incredible hardship, and will continue to be for months or possibly years to come. The good news is that there are things every one of us can do to help change that, and I’m pleased to speak to that a bit later.

I’d like to take a step back for just a moment to share the food bank’s mission, which is to help our neighbors thrive by creating more equitable access to food and opportunity through community partnerships. We are proud to serve as the backbone of our region’s food security infrastructure. It is that mission that drives and infuses every part of the report we are launching today.

Our approach is one that is client centered and data driven. This is central to our work as it helps us identify the various client segments in need; where they live; down to the neighborhood level; the type of age and culturally appropriate food they desire; and the best and most convenient channels for them to access this food and engage with us. We have noticed over the last couple of years that other organizations and agencies – not for profit, private and public – have come to us for data that is useful in informing their work and policy. And that is why we decided that we would periodically research and release a report on hunger and food insecurity in our region.

Our first was last year – quite coincidentally at the beginning of the pandemic. We had not planned on the next for another couple of years, but it became quite clear that our landscape had changed this past year and new, up-to-date information was necessary to inform our work and that of others.

Whenever we talk about food insecurity, it is important to acknowledge that it does not occur in a vacuum. We must directly acknowledge the role that racism and oppression—both throughout history and in present-day structures—plays as a driver of the inequities that perpetuate these challenges and lead to their outsized impact on people of color. Access to

opportunity in our country and in our region is far from equal. Many inequities related to life span, access to education, and employment existed prior to the pandemic and have only been exacerbated as a result of the virus and the resulting economic downturn. As our region comes together to “restart our engines of growth,” it is imperative for us to understand the current landscape, and the history that got us to this point, in order to craft meaningful actions and policy that can support more inclusive social and economic growth.

With that background and context I am now pleased to share the findings from our Hunger Report 2021.

Looking back over this last year, we know that the pandemic has not impacted our neighbors evenly across the country. We’ve learned through many different sources that people of color and lower income individuals bore much greater burdens over this last year. This is just as true within our region. We were able to map data on the effects of the pandemic, and when we compare these maps side-by-side, it’s clear that the same communities were hit by wave after wave of impact – from lost jobs, to food insecurity, to positive COVID cases

We are starting to hear that recovery is coming – unemployment rates are headed downward; things are opening up again. But it is so important for us to look more closely at those numbers and see exactly who is recovering – and who is being left behind. This chart shows how jobs are coming back – or not – for our region by different wage levels. What we see is those who were first and hardest hit – those earning the lowest incomes – are the last to recover, still not doing much better than they were back in April 2020.

These trends are the driving forces behind the incredible increases we have seen in demand for our services over this last year. The food bank distributed 75 million meals over the last 12 months – 2.5 times our pre-pandemic distribution levels. Our partners have shared their data with us as well, and their increases in clients range from 30% to 400%.

As I mentioned earlier, our food bank is a client-centered and data-driven organization. As such, we have committed to conducting direct surveys with our clients on a biannual basis to understand their greatest needs and their experiences. Conducting a survey of this size in the middle of a pandemic certainly came with its challenges, but it was well worth it for the insights we gained about our clients’ experiences over this last year.

First and foremost, what we saw in the data is a dramatic shift in the face of hunger. Those who became food insecure after the start of the pandemic were markedly different from those who were food insecure before March 2020. The primary difference between these two groups was their racial and household composition. The newly food insecure were much more likely to be Hispanic and have children, meaning hunger is severely impacting more children than ever before. I’ll share a bit more detail on these two populations.

As I mentioned, we divided the respondents based on how long they had been attending free food distributions, and this is what we found:

- **More likely to be Hispanic.** The Hispanic population represents over half of newly food insecure respondents, compared to just 16% of respondents who were food insecure before the pandemic.
- **More likely to have children in the household.** Newly food insecure respondents are 60% more likely to reside in households with children, meaning that more kids are being affected by the potentially lifelong impacts of hunger.
- **More of our newly food insecure neighbors reside in MD or in VA.** Montgomery and Fairfax counties led the growth in unemployment over the last twelve to fifteen months.
- **More likely to have a job.** Those who are newly food insecure are 69% more likely to be working.
- **Less likely to speak English.** Newly food insecure respondents are over two times less likely to speak English as their primary language at home.

We asked our clients what *they* felt their greatest barriers to food security are. The top two answers reflect the dilemma of high costs of living and low levels of job opportunity in our region:

- 39% indicated that their **ability to earn a living wage** was their greatest barrier to reliably being able to afford enough food. (Answers included “I work but need to earn more” or “I am unemployed and struggling to find a job.”)
- 29% of respondents said the **cost of housing** was the greatest barrier to food security. (Answer was “I have to pay rent and therefore have less for food.”)

The next set of insights from the data showed that our most vulnerable neighbors are receiving the least support. We looked at our clients who screened as the most food insecure – meaning they are skipping meals, eating less than they know they should, maybe even losing weight because they are not eating enough – and these respondents reported the lowest levels of awareness and utilization of community resources. Among our most food insecure clients:

- Only a quarter are receiving SNAP;
- Only 20% of households with kids are getting free and reduced lunch; and
- Another finding is that only a quarter know of more than one location to access free food (despite hundreds available in the region).

These data and insights have significant and varied implications for CAFB’s own strategy and approach, and in many ways validate much of our recent work to enable better access to age-appropriate, culturally appropriate, nutritious foods and to co-locate them with other support services for ease of access for our clients. We will double down on our advocacy for the redesign of some of the government programs just mentioned so that they are more inclusive and easier to enroll in.

In addition to informing our own strategies, we dedicated the last section of our report to outlining recommendations for increasing food security and economic opportunity by sector – the public sector, the private sector, and the social/nonprofit sector.

For the public sector, priority should be placed on closing the gaps between eligible and

enrolled populations for key government programs like SNAP. Currently, an estimated 65% of eligible individuals in our region are enrolled. This gap in enrollment of 35% translates to approximately \$260 million worth of unclaimed access to food for our region, and incalculable costs resulting from food insecurity. This can be addressed through program utilization commissions, which would analyze and address the greatest barriers to enrollment in programs for eligible individuals. Policy solutions should also focus on increasing economic opportunity for these individuals by enabling long-term wealth accumulation and helping workers stay employed through better benefits.

For the private sector, the focus of the recommendations is on employment and workforce development. The connections between food insecurity and employment are clear – food insecure people cannot thrive, at work or otherwise, inhibiting them from earning a living wage. The private sector has both the incentive and the ability to invest in a positive and far-reaching pipeline, building employment opportunities for communities that traditionally have low access to high quality jobs. This can be through:

- Partnering with organizations that are cultivating talent from these communities, such as community colleges and skill development institutes;
- Offering greater flexibility and benefits to workers so they can remain in the workforce through normal life events; and
- Cultivating talent and upward mobility among existing employees by investing in their growth and development.

As I have heard from many of our clients, there is nothing worse than knowing there is an abundance of high quality, living wage jobs but that they are just too far out of reach, with endless barriers in the way. The private sector has a moral and bottom line imperative to create on ramps for tens of thousands of people who want to contribute to and benefit from the growth that is occurring in our region.

Turning to our own sector, we have to start by acknowledging a basic fact: Barriers to prosperity are not singular for most people. They are numerous and interrelated, and they need to be addressed in tandem for interventions to be effective. We provide a wide landscape of support, all extremely valuable, but the burden of responsibility is on the client to engage each one individually. Go here to get your free food, apply to this program for a childcare subsidy, then go to this other center to gain additional skills. Strategies for creating greater continuity and integration between services are important and can include colocation, referral services, data-sharing about our clients' needs, and integrated service delivery.

For several years now, the food bank has had a saying: We are in the business of getting our clients food to address hunger today, as well as food for brighter futures tomorrow. This has been and will continue to be our approach. Our goal is to transition our clients to greater prosperity through increased opportunity. We will continue doing that through food and through partnerships with our friends in all sectors.

Finally, as we have seen, hunger has ripped through our communities during the pandemic like no time in recent history, and the impacts are profound. The new trends that we're seeing in who's experiencing food insecurity threaten to deepen some of our region's worst inequities. The effects on children, in particular, can have impacts that last for generations. We have a unique window right now to rebuild from COVID-19 in ways that prevent those outcomes and create greater food security and economic prosperity for our neighbors. It's imperative that all of us, across every sector, take the opportunity before us at this moment.

I am delighted to have so many leaders from all sectors here today in person and via Zoom, who are invested in these very same goals. We are so grateful for your support and partnership and look forward to collaborating for many years to come. Now, it is my pleasure to welcome Congressman Jim McGovern, co-chair of the House Hunger Caucus for his remarks."