



United States House Committee on Rules

“Ending Hunger in America: Food Insecurity in Rural America”

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Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Rules thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences working to end hunger in Oklahoma and rural communities. My name is Chris Bernard, and I serve as the founding Executive Director of Hunger Free Oklahoma.

Hunger Free Oklahoma’s mission is to leverage the power of collaboration to solve hunger in Oklahoma by improving systems, policies, and practices. We do not distribute food; instead, we strive to end hunger through collaboration, capacity building, technical assistance, research, and advocacy. We are also the state SNAP outreach contractor and the administrator of the nutrition incentive program, Double Up Oklahoma. We were formed 5 years ago to do exactly what our name says; make Oklahoma hunger-free. Unfortunately, Oklahoma has some of the worst food security statistics in the nation – one in seven households,<sup>1</sup> one in six seniors,<sup>2</sup> and one in five children are food insecure.<sup>3</sup>

We work to address hunger in both urban and rural settings. While work in one setting can inform work in the other, rural Oklahoma has its own unique challenges and opportunities. Rural Oklahoma is not a monolith. It includes historically Black towns, the Ozark plateau, ranch land, farm land, capitals of sovereign nations, and many other unique communities. It has a rich diversity of people, communities, issues, and solutions and there is no way for us to cover every aspect of such a unique community in the time we have today. Solving rural hunger requires a deeper and longer discussion that includes a wide array of stakeholders, which is why Hunger Free Oklahoma supports a White House conference on hunger. Yet today, I do hope to offer you some commonalities of our rural communities to inform your work as policy makers.

Over the past five years, we have seen unprecedented collaborative and individual efforts to address hunger in Oklahoma. The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma and Community Food Bank of Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Feeding America. (2019). Map the Meal Gap. Available at: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/oklahoma>

<sup>2</sup> Feeding America. (2019). The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2019. Available at: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/2021%20-%20State%20of%20Senior%20Hunger%20in%202019.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Feeding America. (2019). Map the Meal Gap. Available at: <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2019/child/oklahoma>.

Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Department of Education, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, the Chickasaw Nation, and many others have worked tirelessly with us and others to create lasting impact. Prior to the pandemic Oklahoma's food security was improving, but even then, less than 10% of children participating in free and reduced-price lunch accessed summer meals,<sup>4</sup> tens of thousands of eligible Oklahomans didn't utilize SNAP benefits,<sup>5</sup> and WIC participation was declining.<sup>6</sup>

The barriers we see in the communities we partner with are likely no surprise to any of you. Barriers like transportation, access to broadband and technology, stigma, and limited community resources are a few of the common hurdles which we have witnessed many times over.

We see the impact of limited transportation and program rigidity on a community when the only WIC-certified store closes and the next closest is more than 20 miles away.

We see entire counties with almost no access to fresh food because of people, dollars, and ultimately stores leaving their communities for areas with more economic opportunity.

We receive calls from thousands of Oklahomans to our SNAP enrollment assistance hotline for help enrolling in SNAP because of barriers to using the online application or reaching a physical application site.

We see summer meal sites close because not enough children can get there safely, even though the data demonstrates great need.

We also see tremendous strength in rural communities despite the many barriers. Rural communities are built upon strong social connectedness and the determined, resilient, solutions-oriented people living in them.

These strengths, when leveraged, can make a huge impact.

We see partnerships like those in Enid, Oklahoma where the local library and the food bank partnered to provide critical summer nutrition and literacy programming in high need communities, boosting access and participation for both programs.

We see communities come together to address hunger through collaborations that support local food systems, build community-wide outreach projects, and target community health. Such as in Perry Oklahoma where a group of concerned local organizations started an anti-hunger coalition and secured funding to offer nutrition incentives at their local grocery store – improving nutrition security and the local economy.

We see how changes to the federal nutrition programs made during the pandemic increased household food budgets and access to meals because they removed barriers, created flexibilities, and prioritized people. We have seen what works.

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<sup>4</sup> Food Research and Action Center. (2019). Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation. Available at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/frac-summer-nutrition-report-2019.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Food Research and Action Center. (2021). Estimates of State SNAP Participation Rates in 2018. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/Reaching2018.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2021.) Annual State Level WIC Data, Total Participation. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/26wifypart-12.pdf>.

If we are really going to end hunger in Oklahoma we need the help of federal policymakers. We ask that Congress:

1. **Leverage the proven effectiveness and efficiency of SNAP and electronic benefit programs to reduce food insecurity and support local economies.** Rural SNAP participants are estimated to spend 30 percent more on food than their urban counterparts.<sup>7</sup> By enhancing these programs, you are not only fighting hunger, you are also keeping local businesses open, creating jobs, and ultimately helping to hold a community together. Specific policies Congress should act upon include:
  - a. Authorize the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer Program permanently. Past Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer Program pilots indicate that access to this benefit allows for the reduction of extremely low food security by one-third, and food insecurity by one-fifth, and improves nutrition for children.<sup>8</sup> By permanently authorizing the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer Program we can ensure that kids do not go hungry during the summer.
  - b. Ensure Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits reflect the costs of a healthy diet. One of the greatest challenges regarding SNAP is the benefit amount for most households is not enough to get through the entire month with enough healthy food for their family. The USDA's recent action, as directed by the 2018 Farm Bill, reviewing the adequacy and subsequently increasing the *Thrifty Food Plan* calculation is a major step in the right direction. However, this should not be a one-time action; there must be regular review and benefit adjustments.
  - c. Allow for simultaneous participation in FDIPIR and SNAP. Native Americans experience some of the highest rates of food-insecurity and diet-related chronic illnesses.<sup>9</sup> FDIPIR is a commodity-based program, but, unlike other commodity-based programs such as WIC and TEFAP, simultaneous participation in SNAP is prohibited. This prohibition is inequitable and limits the potential economic impact for Native American communities.
  - d. Permanently authorize WIC program flexibilities implemented during the pandemic. Pandemic program waivers have allowed WIC to issue benefits remotely and to offer flexibilities in the WIC shopping experience, which have enabled families to use their WIC benefits more fully amidst food supply chain issues and social distancing requirements. As a result, WIC participation has increased by 2.1 percent nationally. Additionally, vouchers intended to increase WIC participants' fruit and vegetable purchasing power should remain in place or be incorporated into a comprehensive increase of the WIC benefit amount.
  - e. Provide sufficient funding structures to scale Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Programs (GusNIP) and/or integrate them into EBT systems. Hunger Free Oklahoma took the Double Up Oklahoma program on two years ago and has successfully grown

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<sup>7</sup> USDA (2017). The Food-Spending Patterns of Households Participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84780/eib-176.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Food Research & Action Center (2019). The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program. Available at: <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/the-summer-electronic-benefit-transfer-program-summer-ebt>.

<sup>9</sup> Bipartisan Policy Center. (2021). Improving Food and Nutrition Security During COVID-19, the Economic Recovery, and Beyond. Available at: [https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/BPC-Health-Nutrition-Brief-1\\_R03-compressed.pdf](https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/BPC-Health-Nutrition-Brief-1_R03-compressed.pdf).

the benefit from \$90,000 to \$2.4 million. The increased access to healthy foods through GusNIP is transforming rural towns like Okemah, Oklahoma where SNAP purchases for fruits and vegetables have increased by over 100%. Organizations and states are ready to expand the scale and impact of nutrition incentive programs across the country, but limited resources are restricting innovation and impact. Increased funding, adjustment of the federal match from a 1:1 ratio to a 3 or 4:1 ratio, and providing funding for integration of programs into the EBT systems would facilitate expansion of programs and better incentivize states to help to fund these programs.

2. **Remove program requirements that exacerbate barriers.** Federal Child Nutrition Programs in particular include several one-size-fits-all program requirements that are not responsive to individual community needs and circumstance. Specific policies Congress should act upon include:
  - a. Remove or provide exceptions to the congregate meal requirements of summer and afterschool meals. Congregate meal requirements can be best leveraged in areas with greater population density. Children in rural Oklahoma often live many miles away from the nearest meal site making it burdensome and costly for families to access the much-needed support. The lack of demand ultimately translates to fewer meal sites due to lack of economic feasibility for program sponsors.
  - b. Expand other proven models designed for our most isolated areas including programs like the Meals to You pilot. Some rural areas may never have enough density to support even a non-congregate meal site. Families in these areas need innovative approaches to reduce childhood food insecurity when children are out of school. In 2020 the Meals to You pilot program expanded during the pandemic providing over 39 million shelf-stable meals to children in rural areas across the country.<sup>10</sup>
  - c. Authorize flexibilities that allow for additional meals for children who stay later in the evening in child care settings. Meal site sponsors are limited to serving only two meals per day, with very limited exceptions.<sup>11</sup> However, there are sponsors who have the capacity and interest in serving three meals a day but are unable to due to these restrictions. Removing this restriction will ensure more regular access to meals for children who are food insecure.
3. **Fund cross sector community level collaborations and solutions.** Funding local-level collaboration will help communities address their needs in innovative ways which can be shared with those facing similar challenges. Specific policies Congress should act upon include:
  - a. Support public-private partnerships focused on addressing hunger and poverty in communities by fully funding section 4021 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018. Rural communities know their own strengths and barriers best and often recognize that to achieve a goal it takes a community-wide effort. Congress authorized a program to support public-private partnership pilot projects to address food insecurity in the 2018 Farm Bill, but has not yet provided funding for this program.

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<sup>10</sup> Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. (2020). Meals to You Shipment by State of District. Available at: <https://www.baylor.edu/hungerandpoverty/doc.php/367052.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> USDA Food and Nutrition Services. (2016). Meal Service Requirements in the Summer Meal Programs. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/meal-service-requirements-summer-meal-programs-questions-and-answers-revised>.

- b. Create new funding streams that will fund community-driven solutions across issue areas to meet the whole needs of a community. Siloed funding streams that focus on one specific subject matter such as food insecurity, health, or housing while useful can also create serious barriers for small rural communities to access. Creating funding streams that allow a community to address an array of issues with the same funds will facilitate easier access for rural communities and more efficient solutions.

The recommendations set out in this testimony reflect the sentiments shared by members from both sides of the aisle and many hunger experts before me. We must empower people and communities to make their own choices and determine what solutions are best for them. We must remove red tape and invest in communities. We must incentivize rather than restrict. We must leverage the strengths of our private sector and existing systems, while ensuring equitable access. We must fund and scale what works!

In Oklahoma and in rural areas across the country working solutions are ready to be scaled, we just need the resources and flexibilities to make it happen. Hunger Free Oklahoma extends an open invitation to members of congress to come to Oklahoma to see and hear first-hand from our partners and community members about our successes, struggles, and determination to solve hunger permanently. Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished committee members, thank you for your time and I look forward to your questions.