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Hunger in Arkansas: How Communities are Attacking Food Insecurity

*Part of a series exploring issues
from The Community Foundation's
Aspire Arkansas report.*



A Decade of Fighting Hunger



In November 2008 Arkansas Community Foundation tried something new — we partnered with hunger relief organizations experiencing record demand and decreased donations because of the economic downturn. In one week, \$203,273 was raised through online donations. We matched those funds with \$100,000 from our Community Giving Stimulus Fund for a total of \$303,273 for hunger relief charities throughout Arkansas.

The Community Foundation was elated that Arkansans stepped up to help feed hungry families, and several of our affiliates decided to continue the Stop Hunger program (see page 7) as a result. Since then, many organizations including the Community Foundation have made an impact on the challenge of food insecurity in our state.

Those working to stop hunger in Arkansas had hard fought wins in the past decade. Though 19.56 percent of seniors still face the threat of hunger, the Arkansas ranking has dropped more than five percentage points from first in the nation to fifth in the percentage of food insecure seniors.

The 2016 merger of Arkansas Food Bank and the Rice Depot united two nonprofits in a common goal to better fulfill their shared mission of providing hungry Arkansans with more healthy and nutritious food. The Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance has become a stronger force for the advancement of food security with programs like Cooking Matters and No Kids Hungry.

Throughout this issue of ENGAGE, you'll see how innovative, creative solutions are helping stop hunger in Arkansas. But we're not there yet. In this holiday season and throughout the year, I urge you to participate in seeking solutions to feed those who are hungry in your local community.

Heather Larkin
President and CEO

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On the cover: Ethan Frazier uses a forklift to move food from the shelves at the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas in Jonesboro to ready it for distribution to food pantries somewhere within the Food Bank's 12-county coverage area. Volunteers from those pantries pick up the food at the Food Bank and take it back for the people who come to them for help.



Produce, included in food distributions from the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas for just the past couple of years, is donated by growers, grocers and companies to help feed families in need.

Helping the Hungry Access Fresh Food

by Kim Dishongh

Food banks and pantries have long made it their missions to provide food to people in need. More and more, they are striving to find new approaches to making sure the right foods reach the right people.

Liz Ivener, retired dietician and director of Helping Neighbors Inter-Faith Food Pantry in Jonesboro, is thrilled that for the past couple of years she's been able to offer produce from the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas to the 750 to 800 families who come in for help.

"That's the one thing a lot of our clients can't afford," said Ivener. "They'll go to food pantries and they'll get canned goods, but food stamps just don't go far enough to cover the fresh produce. Of course, as a dietician, I'm certainly in favor of fresh fruits and vegetables."

"We've worked for years with the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance on gleaning and getting fresh produce but we are really trying to ramp up our fresh produce the last couple of years," said Christie Jordan, chief executive officer of the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas.



Food is stored at the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas.



Fresh corn, ready for distribution at the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas.



The backpack program gives hungry children food for weekends at the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas.

The Arkansas Gleaning Project is a partnership between the Arkansas Hunger Alliance and the Society of St. Andrew, and it involves farmers giving volunteers access to go into their fields after their big harvest and pick whatever produce remains, to be donated to food banks across the state.

"In September or October we are on target to exceed 10 million pounds of produce since the program began in 2008," said Nancy Conley, Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance's communications director. "We are on track to glean 2 million pounds this year alone." The Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas is part of the nationwide Feeding America network, and through it benefits from donations from grocery stores and companies in other states as well as their own.

"We bring produce in by the tractor-trailer load and then sometimes our agencies just pick those things up and provide them as part of their regular distribution," said Jordan. "Sometimes we do a Just in Time delivery to an organization and that's all they do, is produce, that particular day."

The Fresh2You mobile farmers market, created through a pilot partnership between Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, the city of Little Rock, Rock Region Metro and the Blue and You Foundation, also seeks to make produce available to people in food deserts, who might not otherwise be able to get it, and allows them to buy it using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and Double Up Food Bucks, a USDA program that allows them to get twice the value they pay.

The mobile farmers market is set up in an out-of-service Rock Region Metro bus. A non-profit grower puts food on the bus, Conley explains, and someone from Mosaic Church in Little Rock drives it.

Making sure healthy food is available is just a part of the challenge, though. Sometimes making it accessible is a bigger barrier. Sarah Brown, church secretary at Avilla Zion Lutheran Church, runs a food pantry there that serves as many as 165 families on Monday nights. She has taken bags of specially chosen items to homeless people who live in their cars or on the banks of the river. Those people usually don't have a place to cook or wash dishes, so she stocks easy-to-open cans of Vienna sausages, and provides plastic spoons and napkins.

When the pantry was destroyed by arson last year, the community rallied to make its regular weekly distribution possible on the same day as the fire.

"It was very important for us to have pantry that night so that we would have the last word and not the person who burned our building," said Brown. "We gave out 93 bags of food that night. Clients had no idea that the church had burned and when they drove up they stood around and held hands and cried for the loss of the little chapel."

The pantry was moved into two classrooms of the Avilla Christian Academy next door, and an efficient drive-through system has been employed. People go first to the church, where they may attend a short worship session or just get paperwork they can take next door where volunteers load bags of food into their cars.

Because meals are typically shared with others, the Carlisle United Methodist Women run Daily Bread Senior Food Pantry, which serves about 45 seniors monthly, often



Volunteer Meda Scott passes bread to a client at the Avilla Zion Lutheran Church Food Pantry in Saline County. Another volunteer, Bill Jones, touches base with her about another food donation to be made that night. Avilla's food pantry, which serves as many as 165 families on Monday nights, was burned last year but quickly relocated to a temporary location in the Avilla Christian Academy next door.

incorporating a social activity to make meals more palatable. On distribution days, seniors begin lining up at 8 a.m. for a 9 a.m. distribution.

"We serve them breakfast when they come in. On the days they come in we have a sausage ball or a donut and hot coffee — they love the coffee and they sit around and talk, they don't just get their coffee and leave," said Tina Hilman.

Hilman started the pantry after noticing an elderly friend she saw at the post office had lost weight. "I learned she didn't want to cook for herself anymore and the food had gotten so high that she had been going to the dollar store and buying these tiny frozen meals and that's all she was eating in a day," said Hilman.

She realized that several seniors can't drive to grocery stores, carry groceries to their cars or even afford to buy groceries on their limited incomes. She and the other volunteers deliver food to a handful of homebound seniors, and they bag and load groceries into cars for those who arrive at the doors on distribution days.

Helping Neighbors, created by about 25 organizations, all of

which pool resources and volunteers, has received several grants from the Arkansas Community Foundation, including a recent one for kids' packs filled with food to nourish kids through holiday breaks.

"We've gotten air conditioners. We got some hardware one time and then we got the software written and then we got some additional hardware another time," she said.

Ivener has noticed that the sizes of families visiting Helping Neighbors is smaller these days, indicating that more people with children are supporting themselves without help from the pantry. The pantry opens one Tuesday night a month for families, even though it's no longer required to by the UDDA.

"We had built up a clientele and they needed us to be open when they're not working," she said, "so we're open from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. on those nights." Ivener was expecting a delivery of 10,000 pounds of corn and potatoes on a recent Thursday and planned a distribution of that produce alone.

"We're going to have it over there under the trees in the parking lot," she says, adding that she has no doubt they will all be distributed. "By noon there won't be anything left."



Opportunities to Reduce Food Waste

Food waste. Something that's hard to imagine in a state where so many lack access to nutritious and consistent meals.

With many hunger-relief programs spreading throughout the state, our communities are making significant steps towards eliminating food insecurity. But what about programs addressing the need to put an end to massive amounts of food that is wasted?

According to the National Foundation to End Senior Hunger, 40 percent of food produced in the U.S. is never eaten. The average super market wastes 10 percent of its food and an average American family spends \$2,000 on food they end up throwing out.

For a country with more than 46 million of its people suffering from food insecurity, how can food waste simultaneously be an issue? Working to understand how food waste happens is the first step in finding a solution.

The three most common opportunities for improvement occur on farms, at consumer-facing businesses and in households:

Farming Challenges: Unable to foresee market demand and potential weather risks, some farmers find difficulty in growing exactly the right amount of food. Farmers are also affected by certain "beauty standards" that come with selling to larger manufacturers. Brandon Chapman, a third-generation farmer in Scott, Arkansas, said "It's very disheartening because when you plant so many plants in put in so many hours, to have someone come back and tell you your product doesn't look good enough to buy, but you know there's nothing wrong with it," according to a 2016 THV11 news release.

Solution: The Arkansas Gleaning project is a network formed by the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance and the Society of St. Andrew to take advantage of food left behind after annual harvests. Since the program began, more than 9.5 million pounds of fresh produce has been gleaned from Arkansas fields and given to feeding agencies or relief organizations.

Consumer-facing Business Challenges:

Businesses that sell food, whether they are a super market or local restaurant, also play a large role in preventing extra food waste.

Consumer's inconsequential beauty standards, lack of education on what food expiration labels really mean and probability that they'll purchase more than they'll eat, play a significant role in additional food waste.

Solution: According to Walmart's blog, they're taking giant steps to reduce food waste by promoting brands like "Spuglies" (russet potatoes that appear less than perfect), working with farmers to repurpose other "ugly" produce and educating customers about interpreting food expiration labels.

Solution: Locally owned restaurant, @The Corner in Little Rock, orders produce and meat based on what Arkansas farmers have available. As a farm to table restaurant, this requires careful, creative planning to avoid over-ordering. "As a restaurant, it's our responsibility to be diligent in making certain that we're using everything we buy" said Kamiya Merrick, head chef of the downtown diner. "Even if it's a special order, we use everything, which is why you'll always see new items on our menu and interesting daily specials."

Household Challenges: According to Feed America, 43 percent of the food waste in our country comes from households. When families succeed in using all the food they purchase, they can save money, help reduce methane gas emissions and conserve energy and other resources.

Solution: The United States Environmental Protection Agency suggests four ways that families can help reduce the amounts of food they waste: careful, weekly meal-planning; correctly storing food to ensure long-lasting freshness; preparing perishable foods soon after purchasing; and being thrifty by "shopping in your refrigerator first."

On a national scale, if we were to reduce food waste by 5 percent, we could feed 4 million more Americans. By understanding the problem and what each of us can do to reduce the amount of food we waste, we'll be one step closer to ending hunger in Arkansas.

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Communities Work to Stop Hunger

What efforts do we want to support in a sustainable way? What opportunity should we be exploring as a new way to combat hunger in our community? Those are key questions Arkansas Community Foundation affiliates ask before every grant cycle of their Stop Hunger Funds.

When *Aspire Arkansas* data first came out in 2011, and before that in 2008 when an Arkansas Community Foundation Stop Hunger online initiative helped food charities during the recession, several of the 28 Arkansas Community Foundation affiliates determined that the fight against hunger would be one of their priorities.

Dick Freer, chair of the Craighead County Community Foundation Hunger Committee, said their goal is to build relationships where there is food insecurity, boost community support for the need and become a catalyst for making change.

Three Hunger Committee members went to the Student Council at Success Achievement Academy, a Jonesboro alternative school, to ask about hunger. "We got blank looks at first," said Freer. "But the initial discussion got students thinking about their peers who were food insecure and eventually turned into a Food Race where students bring food to supply a food pantry on campus."

"The *Aspire Arkansas* data was a catalyst for our stop hunger efforts," said Freer. "It raised the level of awareness about the



issue and identified hunger as one of the most pressing needs in our area. If we use our \$8,000 to \$9,000 a year in grant money to fund innovation, we can really make a difference."

Many in Craighead County are realizing how much good could happen if fresh fruits and vegetables were more affordable to low income citizens. FFVRX (Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Prescription) is a national program that involves a physician prescribing fresh fruits and vegetables as a medical need. The RX is then used to obtain increased food stamps and other food program benefits to low income patients.

The Craighead County affiliate has been instrumental in setting up the second Friends and Neighbors Network in Arkansas. A national FANN staff member from Atlanta trained volunteers to develop a community of people who are food insecure. These



Students at the Jonesboro Hispanic Center enjoy a healthy snack.



FANN prepares bins of food for each member, a regular supply of nutritious food.



Apples are available from the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas.



Della's Pantry volunteers Catherine Stark and Faye McGary prepare to distribute food.

FANN members meet twice a month to unload and distribute healthy food that provides them an ongoing source of supplemental nutrition. Each distribution includes a membership meeting designed to build community and ownership in the program.

"The Truck Patch, an organic food store in Jonesboro, has worked with our FANN," said Charles Harris, FANN coordinator. "Their generosity has added to the quality of food we can distribute."

Some of their grants fund more traditional hunger programs. For instance, students in the Jonesboro Hispanic Center's after school program enjoy healthy snacks like a choice of peanut butter crackers or apples and milk courtesy of a Community Foundation grant. A review of food pantries receiving grants that ensured minorities were represented led to a connection with New St. John Missionary Baptist Church food pantry.

Jennifer McCracken, executive director of the Cross County

Community Foundation, said most hunger-related grants are determined by their local advisory board. For every grant they are able to make in the fight against hunger, they get 20-25 applications. About 70 percent of their hunger-related grants go to food pantries and backpack programs.

Their official Stop Hunger grants are awarded by the Youth Advisory Council. "It is good for youth to be a part of this," she said. "The hunger grants give our young people a sense of making a difference where the need is great."

Recently, the Cross County affiliate began working with a new nonprofit, 363 Feed the Need, led by Phoebe Curtis and Julie Boone. "We are tackling the problem of hunger through a backpack program and an event called The Table, where we served 400 plates of food to a diverse mix of people at an Interfaith event in Wynne," Curtis said. "Lots of people help the hungry on Thanksgiving and Christmas. We want to help the other 363 days of the year."

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The 363 backpack program started in January of 2016 with 34 students and now they are stocking 125 backpacks each Friday. The cost is about \$150 per child for the school year. Volunteers, youth groups and others pack the food that goes home with students on Friday afternoons at Wynne Primary, Intermediate and Junior High. Soon, they'll be scheduled to work with the local high school.

"Access to weekend food relieves stress about where the next meal will come from. It helps alleviate mental, physical and emotional stress," said Curtis. "The Community Foundation here has made a big impact with grants to us and others who work to stop hunger. There is no way we would be able to do our work without them."

Dana Stewart, executive director of the White County Community Foundation, said the affiliate has been working on food insecurity programs for more than a decade. They have made grants to Beebe School District's Badger Family Food Pantry and to senior programs like the Bald Knob Senior Center. "At Bald Knob like most rural programs, volunteers who run the center do the grant writing, cooking – they do everything," Stewart said.

Because the White County affiliate knows ending hunger will be difficult, they made a grant to purchase shelving to help sustain the program rather than only purchasing food and promoting smart shopping training that shares tips like buying dried beans instead of canned to stretch the budget.

"When we look at the Aspire data and other research, we see that hunger continues to be a real issue for our county," Stewart said. "We may not have the numbers some other counties have, but in our local school district in Searcy, 50 percent of the students are on reduced or free meals. So food insecurity isn't just a rural or urban problem for us, it reaches throughout our county."

A recent grant was made to Della's Pantry in a rural part of White County. Della's Pantry volunteers told these stories:

"One of the things that strikes me the most is the percentage of our families who are older and are raising grandchildren. I would estimate that nearly 25 percent of all the families that visit our pantry are senior adults with at least one grandchild in their care. They live on a fixed income and struggle to provide for the children so they are resorting to visiting our pantry for help."

"It's sad how so many folks are struggling to get by right now. We see so many that are barely surviving. I'm glad we are here to help a little and give them someone to talk with. We try to find words of encouragement for them, but sometimes it's hard to do when we hear of their situations."

"A lady who has been battling cancer for several years came in today. Her daughter and grandchildren have just moved in with her and her teenage son. Her husband died of cancer about three years ago. She isn't able to work, and with so many in the house to feed, she is coming to us for help."



Della's Pantry also offers clothing.



FANN members meet for fellowship after dividing the food they will take home.

"The Aspire Arkansas data was a catalyst for our stop hunger efforts. It raised the level of awareness about the issue and identified hunger as one of the most pressing needs in our area. If we use our \$8,000 to \$9,000 a year in grant money to fund innovation, we can really make a difference."

— Dick Freer



ARKANSAS VIEWPOINTS

What are the most important actions communities and individuals can take to stop hunger in our state?



By Annette Howard Dove
Executive Director
Targeting Our People's Priorities with Service
Pine Bluff



By Kathy Webb
Executive Director
Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance
Vice Mayor, Little Rock

My grandmother raised two large gardens. When it was time to harvest, it was my job to deliver produce to neighbors. Later in life, it was my teen years witnessing my mother, Youvann Howard Anderson, working at Jefferson County Extension Service developing gleaning projects and canning kitchens. She would ask farmers once they harvested their crops to allow families to glean their fields. Afterwards, they would take the produce to a central location in the community and educate others on how to preserve food.

These experiences educated me at an early age how to impact the entire family on food preservation. Food preservation is one of the most beneficial ways to stop hunger in our state. In addition to food preservation, the educating of low-income families on how to prepare meals that are both nutritious and economical is critical.

We as a community need to educate our youth through clubs, like 4-H, and youth community centers on the benefits of agriculture, food preservation and nutrition. It is important to encourage our communities to come together and educate our families, through workshops and activities, to value every single meal. This will help us end hunger: targeting the entire family.

The most important actions a community or individual can take are:

1. Ensure that all citizens who are eligible for SNAP are enrolled, which not only helps the individual but the local economy.
2. Support local pantries at churches, schools, senior centers, etc., and work to improve the quality of food that foodbanks can access.
3. Make sure all children who are eligible have access to "breakfast after the bell" as well as school lunch, plus summer and after school meals.
4. Support nutrition education, such as Cooking Matters, which teaches people how to shop, cook and eat healthy on a budget, and helps reduce food insecurity.
5. Advocate for public policies that assist low income families, such as increasing the minimum SNAP benefit, and increasing the State Food Purchasing Program, which supports state food banks.

Almost weekly, we learn more about the negative impact food insecurity has on learning and on a person's overall health. When communities and individuals come together, we can move the needle on hunger. And that helps all of us.



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The Arkansas Gleaning Project gleaned **2.1 million pounds** of fresh produce in 2016 from 21 growers across the state to help supplement the nutritional needs of low-income Arkansans.
— Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance



Food insecurity is higher for seniors who are African Americans than for whites, for those in rural areas rather than urban and for those age 60-69 rather than those 70 years of age and older
— The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2015

The rates of food insecurity were substantially higher than the national average for households with children headed by single women or single men, women and men living alone, and Black and Hispanic-headed households.
— US Department of Agriculture Household Food Insecurity Report, 2015



\$ Income is the strongest determining factor in food insecurity.
— US Department of Agriculture Household Food Insecurity Report, 2015



The percentage of U.S. households that were food insecure decreased from 14.0% in 2014 to 12.7% in 2015. Food insecurity in Arkansas is 19.9%, significantly higher than the national average.
— US Department of Agriculture Household Food Insecurity Report, 2015



With **19.56%** of seniors facing the threat of hunger, Arkansas has dropped more than 5 percentage points and now ranks fifth behind four other southern states: Mississippi 24.28% Louisiana 23.44% North Carolina 20.73% South Carolina 19.58% Arkansas 19.56%.
— The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2015



About **59%** of food-insecure households participated in one or more of the three largest Federal food and nutrition assistance programs (SNAP, National School Lunch Program and WIC).
— US Department of Agriculture Household Food Insecurity Report, 2015

