INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Driven by ongoing conversations between leading innovative food banks in the movement to address hunger at its root causes, the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona hosted the first ever “Closing the Hunger Gap” conference from September 18 - 20, 2013, in Tucson, Arizona.

In the spirit of key themes of the conference, planners and organizers of the conference undertook a community organizing campaign to build relationships and share leadership in the creation of the conference. Planning spanned nearly a year and a half, and integrated the input and advice of 60 different food banks and hunger-relief organizations across the country. Over 20 staff members of the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona participated in committees and sub-committees within the Food Bank and with partners across the country. They talked one-on-one with contacts, networked to uncover people and programs modeling innovative and best practices, convened conference calls and in-person meetings, and regularly shared information. They trained and practiced how to be facilitators so they could in turn build capacity in others.

In the end, over 300 representatives from 170 different organizations – food banks, health organizations, school districts, farms, and universities – came together for three days of critical discussion, resource sharing, and action planning to:

- Collectively address big questions, like “What are the root causes of hunger?”
- Share practical tools and examples for integrating community food systems with traditional hunger relief work
- Build valuable relationships that open doors to new opportunities
- Create a unified agenda in developing resilient food systems in America, and;
- Build a culture of shared learning and shared leadership.
On the first day of the conference, participants chose one of three tours, to see the places and meet the people involved with community food security work in action. Tour groups visited the Community Food Bank main Tucson branch, the Nogales branch bank, Caridad Community Kitchen, and Las Milpitas de Cottonwood farm, as well as partner organization sites, like Casa Maria Soup Kitchen, Manzo Elementary, and the San Xavier Coop Farm. The second day, representatives from over 50 organizations shared stories, practical tools, and led discussions through participatory breakout sessions. Main themes included community organizing, policy advocacy, supporting local food producers, evaluation, economic development, social justice, nutrition, and education. During the day, participants wrote responses to the question, “Ten years from now, what impact have food banks had towards achieving community food security?” which were combined to build our collective national vision. On the final day of the conference, small groups planned action steps for the next year to move us towards that vision, and committed to taking those actions- now having the necessary tools, resources, connections, and collective support to do so.

This report serves to recognize and validate the great work of so many organizations and people while providing a synopsis of the conference itself. It also serves as an opportunity for reflection six months after the fact. We hope that it will fuel energy and commitment demonstrated at the conference and provide a reference point for all to the action moving well beyond the conference. We hope it will also help to synthesize and communicate some of the “end the line” work happening in food banks already and invite organizations considering such work to join. All information in this report stems from speakers, participants, and organizers of the conference.
RATIONALE: WHY WORK TO END THE LINE?

Says Cherie Jamason, President and CEO of the Food Bank of Northern Nevada, “After 35 years in business, and 5 years of recession, food banks today are feeding more people than ever before, purchasing more supplemental food, mobilizing more resources, employing more people and owning more stuff, raising more money, and spending more to operate.” In organizing this conference, we heard unanimous agreement from food banks that:

- The challenges of decreasing federal funding and increasing need are widespread. Every food bank we spoke with expressed being faced with these challenges.
- The need to shift the way we address hunger is widespread. Every food bank we spoke with was at least already asking questions internally around how they can change the way they serve their communities in light of these challenges above. Many food banks all over the country are already integrating community food security strategies into their work.

Simply put, traditional food bank strategies cannot meet the growing need in their communities, let alone address the reasons why people show up in their lines. While necessary in the short term, emergency food relief efforts provide only immediate fixes that do not address long term systemic issues.

Food insecurity is on the rise. As framed by Mark Winne, author of *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty*, “Nearly 50 million Americans are food insecure and a record number of people – 48 million – are receiving SNAP benefits, [up from] 28 million [in 2008].” Willy Elliott-McCrea, CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County, overheard a question to a presenter during the first day of the conference, “How do you feed 9 billion people?” The answer, “You have 1 billion farmers and gardeners.”

*Hunger, at its root, is an economic issue.*

Conference speakers and participants echoed in agreement that hunger is, at its root, an economic issue. As Mark Winne put it, the root causes of poverty and American wealth disparities have led to, “America’s single greatest socio-economic travesty: the yawning gap between the affluent and everyone else.” “Because the top 1% of income earners in the U.S. control 40% of the wealth compared to 10% in 1973, everyone in this room must struggle harder with programs that try to reduce the impact of those disparities.”
In the United States, economic assistance, including benefits like SNAP, is not rooted in reality of who is living in poverty, nor does it provide sufficient support. According to Jan Poppendieck, author of *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*,

- The official federal poverty threshold is so low that we use 130% of the poverty threshold as the cut off for free school meals and as the grossing cut off for SNAP.
- For every 100 families living below the poverty threshold, only 27 receive cash assistance, down from 68 in 1996 and 82 in 1979.
- Thirty states provide only token assistance for those who don’t have children, and are not disabled or elderly, with benefits reaching only about 25% of the poverty threshold.
- The Transitional Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits are so low that they are below 30% of the poverty level in most states.

Is it any wonder that lines at food banks get longer every day? Joann Lo, Executive Director of the Food Chain Workers Alliance, doesn’t think so, “The very real need for the services of food relief organizations is an indictment of the failure of this country and the economy to provide living wage jobs and economic security for all.”

**Work opportunities, wages and federal economic support are getting worse.**

Cherie Jamason attributed the chronic high need that food banks see to the following:

- underemployment and chronic low employment,
- aging population (more seniors with fewer retirement resources),
- disabled veterans,
- middle class stagnation (wages not rising with cost of living, reductions in employer-paid benefits, people falling further and further behind),
- young people graduating from college with no or few job prospects,
- under-educated families working several jobs and still unable to pay for basic needs,
- job availability has contracted due to technological advances, leaner operations, knowledge work vs. manufacturing

Jan Poppendieck delved deeper into the issues around underemployment and economic support. She asked, “How can any economy or any society thrive when [such] a large percentage of its workforce is underemployed or not employed at all?” Only 43.7% of Americans are employed full-time by an employer, a statistic that continues to trend downward. When taken together, unemployment and underemployment affect 16.9% of Americans, and this doesn’t take into account the number of Americans working far below their skill level, those who have given up looking for work, or who are incarcerated.
Even if employed full-time, minimum wage of $7.25, or an annual salary of $15,080, doesn’t approach a livable income for a family. In fact, according to Jan, “it won’t bring a family of three, certainly not four, anywhere near the poverty level. If the minimum wage had kept pace with inflation from what it was in the 70’s, it would now be $16.00 an hour. It would be a wage many people could actually live [on].” As Robert Ojeda, VP of the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona’s Community Food Resource Center, pointed out, high unemployment and low wages are connected. When jobs are scarce, workers will settle for whatever wage they can get. Poppendieck pointed out that the median wage is now 4% lower than at the start of the recovery.

Similarly, low wages and low benefits are related. Jan explained, “Low benefits help to keep wages down because if the benefits are really low nobody will leave a job however inadequately paid with the idea that they are going to get by with some combination of TANF and food stamps.” Additionally, low wages help keep benefits low because, “you cannot make being on relief more attractive then working, so if you’re working wages are really low, [then] your relief payments are going to be completely inadequate.”

**Economic disparities hit those whom we rely on to bring us food hardest.**

Consider our food chain workers who pick, process, and prepare our food. They make up 15% of the U.S. workforce, the largest single occupational category. They have a median wage of only $9.65 per hour and only 13% receive a living wage; 83% have no health insurance and 79% don’t get paid sick days. And as you might imagine, the vast majority of these workers are people of color. We depend on them for our survival yet they are paid so little they are eligible for food stamps one and a half times more than all other workers.

- Mark Winne

According to Joann Lo, in 2010, food sector workers made only half the average annual median income in the United States. Across the spectrum of roles- from CEO, management, professional, supervisor, office worker, and front line- food workers have lower incomes than any other sector; 23% make subminimum wage, 37.6% make poverty wage, 25.8% low wage, and, as Mark pointed out, only 13% make a living wage. Disparities exist among racial and ethnic divides and undocumented immigrants are taken advantage of by lower wages and longer hours worked.

While the industrial food system keeps food chain workers’ wallets empty, it extracts wealth from communities, particularly rural. According to Ken Meter, President of Crossroads Resource Center, even though we’ve been selling more food and farmers have been getting more and more productive, the
number of farmers and the wealth of farmers has steadily been decreasing. In a conversation following the conference, Ken summed this up,

_In the 96 regions in 32 states where I have researched local farm and food economies, I typically find that the food system itself is drawing money away from both urban and rural communities: farmers are not as profitable as they were forty years ago, after doubling productivity; in most regions, farmers spend hundreds of millions of dollars purchasing essential inputs such as machinery, fertilizer, fuel that are sourced from distant places; while their neighbors buy billions of dollars of food from far away. When these hourly purchases that all of us make buying food each day draw wealth away from our communities, it is very difficult for anyone to build wealth if they do not already own it. The entire economy is extractive._

- Ken Meter

As Ken says, “If farmers aren’t making wealth, we are not going to have a sustainable food system.”

**Hunger and poor health go hand-in-hand.**

_Is there anyone in this room who is still sitting on the fence trying to decide if there is a link between the rise of cheap food and the tripling of healthcare costs in America from $1 trillion to $3 trillion a year?_

- Willy Elliott-McCrea

Obesity and diet-related diseases, are ironically and tragically, increasingly becoming a problem for those who are hungry. According to Mark Winne, “The Center for Disease Control estimates that one-third of Americans will be diabetic by 2050. Indeed, the leading reason for rejecting U.S. military recruits is now obesity. It is why, according to the Institute of Medicine, that among the 17 most developed nations, Americans have the lowest life expectancy and the highest poverty rate.”

Amy Lazarus Yaroch, Executive Director of the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition, studies how these issues show up in children. According to her, 8.2 million children in the U.S. are food insecure, meaning increased levels of child under-nutrition, developmental issues, cognitive issues, psychosocial issues, physical impairments, and poor academic performance. Currently, 23 million children/adolescents are overweight or obese, which means increasing rates of coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, cancers, high blood pressure, high levels of triglycerides, liver and gallbladder disease, sleep apnea, and respiratory disease.
Jill Staton Bullard, CEO of Interfaith Food Shuttle, gives equal weight to a person’s access to healthy food as their income in the causes of hunger. When people live where the only food that is available and affordable is highly processed without great nutritional value, you will see health disparities—obesity, heart disease, poor nutrition.

According to Jan Poppendieck, “51% of our calories come from hyper-processed foods.” These foods—widely available in low-income neighborhoods—are cheap for numerous reasons. Farm commodity subsidies make certain ingredients like corn and soy cheap. These ingredients can then be turned into high fructose corn syrup to increase appeal and soy isolates to extend shelf life. Products are formulated with fats and sugars to “hit pleasure centers” and addict consumers. Foods are easy, quick, and marketable.
REFLECTIONS: WHAT RESONATED WITH PARTICIPANTS?

With such a diversity of organizations and perspectives present at the conference, each participant walked away with their own learning, commitment to action, and hopes for the future. And at the same time, strong themes arose out of speakers’ words and participant feedback.

**Our paradigm is shifting from anti-hunger to anti-poverty and our strategies must reflect that.**

This was a major theme of the conference, and was referenced many times by both presenters and participants. Jan Poppendieck opened with, “poverty is the root cause of hunger and in the United States, an inadequate supply of jobs is a major cause of poverty.” She continued,

*Inequality has reached a level not seen since 1913 when the income tax was instituted. We have gone back to pre-income tax levels of inequality. This is outrageous [and] something we need to address and fundamentally so . . . you have enormous credibility from the work that you do and legitimacy, you are the good guys and gals in the white hats and we need to use this . . . on behalf of fair, humane public policy at the national level.*

Matt Knott, Feeding America’s COO, added,

*Increasingly though we realize we cannot end this fight to end hunger alone, we have to work with other partners, like yourselves all across the country, to be able to help clients to improve their own lives, to provide for themselves. So we are increasingly focused on client centered strategies, recognizing food insecurity is not just about food, it is about economic stability, it’s about household stability, it’s about health and wellness.*

In her presentation, Cherie observed, “We may not have ended hunger because: the method we have chosen may not work, the mission/goal may not be correct, hard work may not be enough anymore, our options may need to evolve, all of the above.” Erik Talkin, CEO of the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County, championed food banks acting as multi-dimensional catalysts to transform:

- **The individual** (e.g., helping them feel empowered to make change)
- **The family** (e.g., offering food literacy and production programs)
- **The neighborhood/school/social network** (e.g., using community organizing to engage)
- **The community** (e.g., affecting use of land and resources)
- **The county** (e.g., reforming the local food system)
- **The state** (e.g., utilizing the state association)
- **The country** (e.g., advocating for living wages)
- **The world** (e.g., learning from and teaching to other nutrition programs)

For participants, discussions of living wages, unemployment, poverty, and other “root causes” of hunger sentiment shared by many was expressed in this comment, “[This conference] challenges us to take real and immediate steps to begin addressing the root causes of hunger and poverty.” Many participants agreed that the way to do so is through community organizing around social justice. In that vein, some noted a disconnect between discussions around community organizing, and actual representation by community members or people of color at the conference. Elaine Himelfarb, Senior Program Officer of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger Foundation, noted this and commented, “That challenge is one that all anti-hunger organizations struggle with, but it would be great to see the [next] conference with more community member representation and presentations.”
Food banks and organizations with related missions can learn from each other and must take collective action.

Matt Knott and keynote speakers noted the importance of the food bank networks and opportunities to network at the conference. Willy Elliott-McCrea said,

We know that we all need one another and that we must gather together. There is so much innovation and imagination here in this room this morning, . . . we must reflect and develop our skills and resources in building the movement to build healthy, sustainable, and abundant communities! We know that is we continue to operate in our silos, then the problems will continue to get worse, much worse.

Wally Verdooren, Feeding America’s Director of Foundation Relationships, shared after the conference that their staff had met and reflected on their experience, “From Feeding America’s perspective, there’s now a cohort of food banks that has organized organically. And let’s let everyone know that this is a good thing.”

Overall, participants felt the conference provided an invaluable opportunity to connect with other food banks and groups addressing issues of food security. Some specifically noted feeling less isolated having met others at food banks doing similar work. Others noted the power of connecting together to pursue common goals. Many participants welcomed the opportunities outside of the official sessions, tours, and keynote addresses to network, learn from each other, and exchange ideas.
We can only end hunger if we do it in collaboration with community partners.

Food banks and other groups working to end hunger typically operate in community-based settings. Keynote speakers framed food banks’ roles in working with other organizations, agencies, clients, and others as connectors, conveners, community builders, and catalysts. For instance, Willy Elliott-McCrea said,

We must become conveners in our communities. We must build genuine collaborations that can create brighter futures for the next generations through healthy food, workforce preparedness, housing, jobs and more. We need to become community economic builders, supporting the kinds of micro-enterprises that build community wealth and opportunity for all to contribute . . . And we understand that we must also grow our network to engage thousands of other partners in education, health, business, food systems, workforce development and micro-enterprise...to be able to create the educational work and systemic change necessary to get to the other side of whatever it is we are going through.

From Ken Meter’s perspective,

What I think is important is to really build webs of support and connection that really engage people in learning how to produce food and trade that food in local businesses, local non-profits and local agencies; what I call a community based food web. If we build these we will find food miles going down, but the real goal is to build those connections.
Conference participants from across the country emphasized the importance of working with community partners to achieve their missions. Some noted that they wouldn’t have been successful if not for community collaboration. Some participants pointed to the “unique position [of food banks] to solve [the] problem because they have connections from grass roots to grass tops.”

**NOTABLE INNOVATOR: FEAST**

Food Education Agriculture Solutions Together is a program of the Oregon Food Bank. OFB staff convene conversations among a broad spectrum of regional communities that lead to self-determined organizing plans for food systems work in the community. Outcomes have included new farmers’ markets, increased SNAP and WIC acceptance, expanded community gardens, new donors for food bank, and nutritional education opportunities. FEAST has been replicated through over 50 events in 7 states that have brought together over 1,500 people. FEAST was nationally recognized by Feeding America’s 2013 Innovation Awards.

**The people and communities we serve MUST be engaged in the decisions that affect their lives.**

*Success should be measured by the numbers of families no longer being helped, by the number of families back on their feet . . . We are helping our families get comfortable finding their voice, teaching one another and speaking up about their own challenges and hopes.*

- Willy Elliott-McCrea

A traditional food-banking relationship is one between service provider and client. Increasingly food banks are shifting to view their “clients” as partners and capacity-building as a key to developing meaningful partnerships and long-term success. Robert Ojeda, and many conference participants, champion moving from an expert-client relationship to a collaborative-transformative relationship to reach the greatest level of impact.
To do so, we must first understand that our engagement with people occurs on a continuum and we must be intentional about where our work should fall on this continuum. Robert drew from the work of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) to illustrate this:

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<td>Public Participation Goal:</td>
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<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</td>
<td>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</td>
<td>To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.</td>
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Conference participants agreed with the importance of collaborating with and mobilizing communities. They phrased the importance of creating community connections as being about community integration, the development of community, and building relationships so community members could have space to lead. They also walked away with specific ideas of how to do this. Following breakout sessions, participants mentioned examples like:

- “Spend[ing] time with community leaders before jumping in to revamp a community garden,
- Encourage more groups . . . to grow culturally appropriate foods,
- Re-up efforts to meet with neighborhood/stakeholder groups and invest in mentoring and raising up community leaders,
- Develop a focused strategy for community engagement and develop a team to help.”

**NOTABLE INNOVATOR: Las Milpitas de Cottonwood, Tucson, Arizona**

A model of community organizing, food production, and leadership development. Initial organizing efforts started door-to-door into a community divided by history, vocation, and housing. Through one-on-one and group conversations about people’s hopes, dreams, and sense of place, the Las Milpitas Community Organization envisioned, participated in the design, and made decisions about the formation of the farm. Focus is on capacity building and leadership development. Food Bank plays more of a facilitative role.
Food banks can and should advocate for policy change.

Food banks’ role in advocating for policy change may have been the most controversial topics of the conference, which may explain also some participant comments that speakers’ emphasis on policy didn’t match the actual conference content. Matt Knott pointed out that food banks already do advocate on some level:

We [Feeding America] are also very focused on shaping the minds and decisions of key influencers and policy makers. We are a leader in advocacy work and trying to shape public policy to support the millions of Americans who are struggling with hunger in this country. In fact just this week, our network generated more than 5,000 calls to Congress in an effort to try and protect funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Speakers acknowledged this work and challenged, in some very specific ways, food banks to do more. Jan thanked Feeding America for the 5,000 calls and asked if it is not an unreasonable goal for there to have been 60,000 calls- one from each of the network’s organizations. She furthered challenged participants to consider expanding their role:

Judging from this program, the focus of this conference seems to be on program innovation not on policy, on local and regional not on state and national, on food systems and not so much on social justice, so I want to remind you of the other sides of that. ... we also need to work on the policy end so schools [for example] would be able to have the resources to do that more widely. When I think about the importance of policy I just want to ask you what’s going to happen in your community on November 1st when SNAP benefits get cut? [Y]ou might want to . . . think about what is going to happen in your community when those cuts take effect.

Mark Winne, picking up the charge, challenged food banks to, “Take a pledge that you will not engage in any more capital campaigns until your state and community have passed significant living wage laws and ordinances.” In response to a question about what food banks could do, Joann Lo responded,

1) Add a “know-your-rights” component to your trainings so the program participants know what their rights as workers are

2) Take part in advocacy to support policies and laws that benefit food workers, such as raising the minimum wage and providing paid sick days to all workers

3) Explore collaborations or partnerships with local workers organizations that could possibly lead a know-your-rights workshop for your program participants and whose members could likely benefit from your programs
There was strong support from participants in food banks taking on the role of policy and advocacy work and there was also some reticence. Participants raised questions around how to start such work, get food bank leadership to prioritize it, and how it might affect donors’ support. On evaluation forms, participants asked for more of a policy focus at the next conference. One participant voiced the sentiments of others who want to see policy change start in their organization when they said, “Closing the Hunger Gap means closing the wealth and racial inequality gaps. How can food banks directly confront these, not only in public policy but in organizational hiring and payment practices?”

**We must be working to support local and regional food systems.**

This theme was evident throughout the conference, not only in response to keynote speaker Ken Meter and break-out sessions which focused on farming, but also in the discussion of local job skill development initiatives. Given that one of the conference tours focused around developing gardening resources, a farmers’ market, and a community garden and farm, it is unsurprising that this emerged as a theme of the conference.

Ken Meter spoke passionately about this theme,

*I’ve never seen a social movement erupt as fast in every state of the country as this one has. It’s a very vibrant potential for transforming American society. . . I would argue that what we call the local food movement is the most single important thing we can do to recover the American economy right now. . . Food banks [are] an integral part of the food system. . . Food systems should build in our communities: health, wealth, connection and capacity.*

**NOTABLE INNOVATOR: Gleaners Community Food Bank of SE Michigan**

Gleaners collaborates with policy partners to affect local, state, and national policy change. Partners include Detroit Food Policy Council, MNA S.E. Michigan Policy Council, Detroit Future City Long-Term Planning Initiative, Food Bank Council of Michigan, Michigan No Kid Hungry Initiative, Michigan Good Food Charter Steering Committee, Detroit Food and Fitness Collaborative, and Feeding America. Gleaners works on a range of policy issues from urban agriculture ordinances to state tax credits to federal food and policy.
Mark Winne echoed the message, “If you want to expand the economy and strengthen the social fabric of communities, invest in sustainable and regional food systems.” Cherie Jamason noted that food banks have community position/credibility, community leadership and relationships, a history of accountability, minimal turf issues, and a culture of collaboration that can bring people to the table.

Participants welcomed a critical look at food banks’ role in their local food systems. Some noted the complexity of food system work and recognized the connections to important partners are forged through a food system lens. Others comments illustrated a belief that when food banks have focused their work more at a food system level, they will understand their work to end hunger differently.

**Food banks need to become learning organizations.**

This theme addresses desires to create and sustain cultures, organizationally and as a movement, that support innovation, impact-driven evaluation, and a broader understanding of our missions by all levels of food bank employees and ambassadors. A comment by Mark Winne illustrates the drive for many behind this theme,

> I’m reminded of a visit not too many years ago to a large city food bank where I found myself chatting with several of its younger staff. They were disheartened by their inability to try new things and asked me how they could make change in a place where the executive director wouldn’t listen to them. Pretty soon the executive director in question appeared and the young people promptly went silent.
Numerous participants commented that board members and staff may have conflicting views about priorities or visions for the future of the organization. At least some felt what they learned at the conference would help them persuade leadership to broaden their mission. As an example, Cherie Jamason shared Mark Winne’s “letter to a donor” with her board of directors following the conference and it prompted them to revisit their mission statement.

Others appreciated and want to become better educated in the nuances of evaluation towards the goal of becoming more effective, integrated, and innovative. As part of that, participants really appreciated learning how organizations are taking risks in order to innovate. One participant stated the importance of acknowledging, “We started with this. It didn’t work, but we learned a lot.”

A question remains for many participants - what role, if any, does Feeding America play in all of this? One Feeding America staff person reflected, “So many in the network are way ahead of the national office (Feeding America), in philosophy and programming. How do we play a part of that in a constructive way?”

**NOTABLE INNOVATOR:**
*Food Bank of Northern Alabama*

The food bank of Northern Alabama acts as a convener in their community: They engaged in business development with low-income neighborhoods, have created a loan fund for emerging businesses, and co-founded the Northern Alabama Farm Food Collaborative, which is developing a local food hub and connects local farmers to schools and SNAP recipients. They attempted to build a worker-owned market, though despite huge community buy-in, could not secure funding. FBNA purposefully evaluated why it didn’t work and used as a learning opportunity

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*Health and nutrition are central to food banks’ evolving missions.*

Presenters and conference participants spoke about the importance of incorporating health and nutrition concerns into missions of food banks around the nation. Topics included how to improve the quality of food distributed, how to ensure that people know how to prepare healthy foods, and how food banks can be stakeholders in improving public health.
Ken Meter said,

*I don’t think it’s any surprise for anyone in this room working as intimately with low-income people as you are who’ll understand that food is very closely related to our health outcomes. There is nothing we can do better to avoid hospitalization and medical bills than to eat really well.*

Willy Elliot-McCrea championed, “Food banks and allies [should] become public health organizations. We must learn how to source the nutritious food needed for health and wellness.”

And Mark Winne specifically challenged food banks, “Over the next three years, pledge to eliminate all but 10% of your food donations that are non-nutritional and unhealthy.”

Participants agreed that food banks play a critical role in public health, through the foods they distribute, the educational programs they offer, policies they support, impacts they evaluate, and partners they engage with. For example a participant said, “Our food bank doesn't do enough to promote healthy eating, so hearing what others do encourages me to address the types of food we distribute.” Another noted, “It's important that we utilize food banks as distribution experts to push public health programming,” and another recognized the “critical nature of the impacts on public health of food bank nutrition policy.”

**NOTABLE INNOVATOR:**

**Food Bank of Central New York**

The Food Bank of Central New York prioritizes nutritious food in all programs of the food bank. Through an internal education process with donors, member agencies, program recipients, and staff, they approached creating a broad food behavior change through improving the food environment at their own organization. Changes that followed included instituting a No Soda, No Candy donation policy, and revising purchasing standards to prioritize highly nutritious demand items. Additionally, produce is distributed year-round, and on-site gardens have been installed at member agencies. They manage a coupon program with farmers markets and do SNAP Outreach.
RISING TO THE CHALLENGE AND TAKING ACTION

Walk with the dreamers, the believers, the courageous, the cheerful, the planners, the doers…the people with their heads in the clouds and their feet on the ground. Let their spirit ignite a fire within you to leave this world better than when you found it...
Wilfred Peterson (shared in a conference reflection by Kim Dorniden of Mid-Ohio Food Bank)

Ten years from now, what impact have food banks had in achieving community food security?

Participants answered this question as they populated the conference “visioning wall” with ideas. By the third day, 8 themes had clearly emerged from individual responses. By the end of the conference, participants had committed to taking action collectively towards their shared vision.

Willy Elliott-McCrea called everyone to action,

First within ourselves, we the choir – we the food programs and allies gathered here – today must learn how to work collectively. We have tremendous experience and resource in this room and we are all so very engaged in our work day to day. I believe we must deploy the most talented resources we can find to assist us to move forward successfully and effectively towards this new vision and collaboration.

As people met and discussed the current reality of each theme, what success would look like in 2-3 years if efforts were focused towards the vision emerged. Some actions were planned for people to take in the next year, together. Following are the eight themes and the accomplishments that 23 teams committed to working towards in the next year:
**Food Banks as Public Health Institutions**
- Develop media campaign to change public perception regarding food banks’ role in public health
- Develop internal nutrition strategies and policies that reflect best nutrition policy practices
- Initiate dialogue and collaborations with public health partners and institutions to create actionable plans benefitting clients’ health and wellness
- Develop and pilot health and wellness education programs with partner nutrition organizations

**Food Banks in Symbiotic Relationship with Local Food Producers**
- Create a food hub assessment to assess a food bank’s capacity and regional food infrastructure/system
- Conduct feasibility study and stakeholder meetings in Yuma, Arizona, towards developing a 5-year plan for increasing local products in schools
- Evaluate Mid-Atlantic Farm to Food Bank best practices and share information via webinar/video and blog

**Capacity Building and Convening**
- Create community food security stakeholder list/map to identify range of common issues
- Create a place in the Feeding America Network for community food security work through the 2014 ACPN Conference, a peer sharing site and the F.A. Executive Director training
- Develop regional trainings for food banks on how to convene and create community collaborations

**Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Innovation and Learning**
- Quarterly “RICE” (Resources, Innovation, Collaboration, Engagement) call and blog to provide and share resources to food advocate stakeholders
- Developing regular national communication for groups doing community organizing and social justice work to share models

**Becoming Community Economic Builders**
- Develop mentorship program and innovation incubators to further the practice of community economic development among food banks
- Develop a national request for proposals for business development program to solicit best ideas to pilot/implement

**Food Banks as Community Organizers and Social Justice Advocates**
- Mobilize food bank clients through voter registration and civic engagement campaign to increase participation in anti-hunger and anti-poverty policy change
- Develop an anti-oppression training so food banks can address the root cause of hunger by understanding systemic oppression
- Create Community Advisory Committee to give community members a place at the table and ensure that clients/consumers have input to the resources available through the food bank
• Develop a regional/national community organizing training with local leaders to shift food bank network paradigm, share and build skills, and build a movement led by folks in low-income communities
• Encourage national communications on community organizing through an informal working group and creation of a map of community organizing models in the food bank network
• Start a national conversation about social justice
• Build a campaign for fair wages at food banks to position food banks as advocates and examples

**Food Banks as Public Policy Leaders**
• Convene a day of introduction, inspiration, and intention with your local policy partners
• Engage food bank boards in public policy so boards allocate resources in this area and advocate for policy as individuals

Participants on the first morning of the conference
NEXT STEPS

So, what is next?

If you participated in the conference and were part of an action team...
You already have a plan and are hopefully making progress. There is a blog on thehungergap.org site and a Closing the Hunger Gap Facebook page to stay connected with your team members and others who attended the conference or are interested in it. We’d also love to hear about the progress you’re making, so please post something!

If you didn’t participate in the conference or didn’t participate in the action planning, but want to get involved, or are interested in joining the national advisory committee to advance collective action...
Please feel free to contact Leona Davis, Education and Advocacy Coordinator at the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona’s Community Food Resource Center, at lDavis@communityfoodbank.org, to find out how to get involved in one of the action teams or discuss other roles that may suit you. Feel free to post on the blog at thehungergap.org site and the Closing the Hunger Gap Facebook page.

Moving forward collectively...
The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona invested greatly to build momentum towards collective action and has committed additional resources for a position to help facilitate the evolution of what we have started. Bryn Jones of Elan Consulting, who helped lead the design of the Closing the Hunger Gap conference and trained the amazing team of facilitators who made the conference possible, will be stepping into that role.

The Oregon Food Bank has also stepped up in a big way to advance our common goals. They will be hosting the second Closing the Hunger Gap conference in 2015 in Oregon, and have hired a part-time position to support and provide coordination for collective action. They also plan to hire someone to focus completely on planning the conference.

Additionally, the national advisory committee that grew out of the conference planning continues to meet, discuss, and plan this new collective effort. At the end of February 2014, this committee met in Portland, OR, to further develop a plan of action to connect, support, and mobilize those who attended and those who could not attend the Closing the Hunger Gap conference. Be on the lookout for communications about that plan and how you can be a part of these coordinated efforts.
Thank You to everyone who made The Hunger Gap conference possible!

The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona would like to extend a special thanks to the Closing the Hunger Gap Conference Planning Committee (staffed by the CFBSA), the national advisory committee members, keynote speakers and presenters, local partners, and hundreds of hunger allies across the nation for your hard work and dedication.

We are grateful for the countless hours of conversations and planning that went into creating this event. Without each and every one of you we wouldn’t have been able to make it happen, and for that we are truly thankful.

National Advisory Committee:
Robert Ojeda and Leona Davis, Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona
Thomas Ferraro, Laura Sugarwala, and Dominique Hawkins, Foodlink NY
Suzanne Masterson, Sharon Thornberry, and Megan Newell-Ching, Oregon Food Bank
Jessica Powers, WhyHunger
Erik Talkin, Foodbank of Santa Barbara County
Bill Bolling, Atlanta Community Food Bank
Kathryn Strickland, Food Bank of Northern Alabama
Matt Habash, Bridget DeCrane, and Kimberly Dorniden, Mid-Ohio Food Bank
Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center, Minneapolis
Willy Elliott-McCrea, Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County
Bonnie Weigel, FoodShare

Keynote speakers:
Willy Elliott-McCrea, CEO, Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County
Ken Meter, President, Crossroads Resource Center
Jonathan Rothschild, Mayor of City of Tucson,
Mark Winne, Author, Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty
Dr. Jan Poppendieck, Author, Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement
Dr. Gary Paul Nabhan, W. K. Kellogg Endowed Chair in Sustainable Food Systems at the University of Arizona Southwest Center
Michel Nischan, CEO, Founder, and President of Wholesome Wave

Presenters:
Allison Pratt, Alameda County Community Food Bank
Amy Yaroch, Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition
Barbara Andersen, Orfalea Foundation
Bill Bolling, Atlanta Community Food Bank
Board members from the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, Food Bank of North Alabama, and Oregon Food Bank
Bonnie Weigel, Foodshare
Bridget Dobrowski, Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders
Brook Bernini, Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona
Cherie Jamason, Northern Nevada Food Bank
Cindy Gentry, Tempe Community Action Agency
Dave Tally, Tempe Community Action Agency
Dewayne Wells, Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeast Michigan
Erik Talkin, Food Bank of Santa Barbara County
Heather Hudson, Food Bank of Central New York
Jan Poppendieck, Author
Jessica Powers, WHY Hunger
Jill Staton Bullard, Interfaith Food Shuttle
Joann Lo, Food Chain Workers Alliance
Julia Tedesco, Foodlink
Kate Danaher, RSF Social Finance
Katey Rudd, Tarrant Area Food Bank
Kathryn Strickland, Food Bank of Northern Alabama
Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center
Kimberly Dorniden, Mid-Ohio Food Bank
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Michelle Wallace, Vermont Food Bank
Mitch Gruber, Foodlink
Phoebe Kitson, Chester County Food Bank
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Sharon Thornberry, Oregon Food Bank
Tom Hopkins, Habitat for Humanity
Wally Verdooren, Feeding America
Willy Elliott-McCrea, Food Bank of Santa Cruz County
Yolanda Gomez, Farmworker Association of Florida
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