

Food Banking and Ending Hunger: A Response to Prof. Molly Anderson's Roatch Lectures Remarks

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When it comes to ameliorating hunger, food banks are on the front line. Arizona food banks typically serve 450,000 individuals each month. During COVID, that skyrocketed to more than 1 million individuals at times. We know from food bank client surveys, that about 24% are over the age of 60. Nearly half of food bank clients in Arizona are Hispanic and 32% are white, non-Hispanic. Ninety three percent (93%) reside in permanent housing and 34% have at least some college education. Twenty three percent (23%) of households have a member that served in the military. More than half have a member with high blood pressure, diabetes or other health issue.

Food banks provide an emergency food response. Nearly 36% of the food distributed in food banks comes from the federal government, 29% comes from agriculture, 16% is from grocery/retail partners, food drives provide 1% and food banks purchase about 4%. Other sources balance out the remaining. Food banks do a lot to alleviate hunger in their communities. Last year Arizona food banks received more than 244 million pounds of food from these sources. Our work makes a huge impact daily on individuals struggling with hunger. However, this work is small in comparison to all the hunger relief in the United States. Programs like SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or WIC, the Women, Infants and Children program or the NSLP, the National School Lunch Program provide millions of meals a day for Arizonans. Emergency hunger relief from food banks accounts to less than 10% of all hunger relief.

Food banks are emergency food providers. Emergency in the sense that we provide approximately 3-5 days' worth of food to a household at a time. Sometimes individuals come to see us once a month, other times once a year. Because most of the food we distribute is donated, we are beholden to donations to determine the quality and quantity of the food we distribute. Sometimes that means we have fresh vegetables to give out thanks to our agriculture partners. Sometimes that means we have more snack foods. Consistency of the type and quantity of food is a challenge for food banks for this reason. Finally as relief providers, volunteers make up nearly half of our workforce. Our network is a patchwork of churches, community centers, other social service providers who operate self-determined hours, days and with a variety of staffing resources. The pandemic was devastating to volunteer recruitment. This greatly limited our ability to serve clients especially at small pantry partners.

Demand at food banks fluctuates as well. We are countercyclical to the economy. When the economy is bad, we are often the first to respond to the immediate needs of low income individuals. When the economy recovers, we see individuals in our lines return to work, get better hours and stabilize their income. Food banks were among the first to respond to the economic crisis during the pandemic. With support of the federal government, we are very good at crisis response. We pivoted quickly to improvements such as mobile pantries, drive thru distributions and deliveries to homes. We heard from many individuals that experienced hunger for the first time. The National Guard was called in to support our lack of volunteers and has remained with us as volunteers slowly return. Donors have been very generous during the pandemic as well, with both funds and food.

The pandemic also brought better solutions to hunger outside of food banking. Pandemic EBT which provides additional support for children that lost school meals has been critical. Individuals received increased SNAP benefits which helped combat increased food prices and more client choice of foods. Universal school meals helped provide stability for families who were worried about keeping children home due to COVID or quarantine requirements while still meeting their nutrition needs on a budget. Policy discussions are now being had about other improvements such as higher wages, universal basic income and food prescriptions covered by Medicaid.

Food is certainly a commodity right now. Should it be a right? Solving hunger cannot be the sole responsibility of charity. We need the private sector and government aid. The problem of hunger is now just too large. We need everyone to come together for large scale solutions.