

The Real Solution to Fighting Hunger is Fighting Poverty

By Andrew Fisher - former executive director, Community Food Security Coalition

A few years ago, just as the holiday season was underway, my third-grade son, Orion, came home quite excited: "There's a food drive in my school. The class that brings in the heaviest food and raises the most money will win a pizza party." He promptly started scouring the cabinets for the heaviest food we had. We gave him a few cans of beans to take to class the next day. A week or so later, as I was headed out to the grocery store, he urgently implored me to pick up some more heavy food, as other classes seemed to be ahead of his. He really wanted that pizza party.

As I was at the grocery store considering the dollar-to-pound ratio of foods to purchase for his classroom bin, I realized that the food drive was a microcosm of the fundamental weakness of the charitable food system: it was all about the number of pounds distributed.

Food banks typically measure their success by the weight of the food they distribute and the number of people they serve. The heavier the food is the better it is. The more people they serve, the more successful they appear to be.

I have run into this problem head-on in my own work experience. As the interim leader of a small gleaning group in Portland, Ore., I found it difficult to convince grant makers to consider indicators other than the weight of the fruit we picked.

Yet pounds distributed and people served are not the outcome measures but outputs. They do not assess impact. Most important, they fail to recognize that food is the solution to hunger only in the most illusory and temporary of ways. It fails to resolve the underlying problems that lead people to lack sufficient food in the

first place. Peacekeepers know that a truce does not mean there is peace. Health professionals know that the absence of disease does not mean a person is healthy. Likewise, giving away a bag of food may end today's hunger but doesn't deal with the underlying causes that led the individual to be in that unfortunate situation. Hunger is a symptom of poverty, itself linked to powerlessness.

Perpetuating Charity

A bag of groceries is a measly substitute for increased political power. Yet, if all a food charity does is to treat today's hunger but not its underlying causes, the charity fosters its own self-perpetuation. A free box of food every month keeps people at hunger's edge, doing little to help them avoid coming back the next month. The anti-hunger field has become the hunger-maintenance industry.

And food charities have gone far beyond simple survival. Food charity has been growing by leaps and bounds since the early 1980's, when modest food-distribution efforts came into being to help workers laid off by a recession.

Last year in the Feeding America food-banking network alone, more than 200 food banks served food pantries and soup kitchens that provided 46 million people in the United States with four billion meals. Anti-hunger charities continue to grow by popular demand: volunteers and donors feel good about "solving hunger." Food Companies earn a tax write-off and a halo effect from their donations. Conservative policy makers see charity as a way to help privatize our national response to hunger. And CEO's of food banks earn nice bonuses on top of their \$200,000 salaries when they exceed poundage goals.

Oppression and Racism

The anti-hunger industry grows because entrenched interests profit from it, not because it helps the poor. Poor people are just the pas-through suffering death by a thousand cuts to their dignity every time they need to pick up food to help them get by to the end of the month. Their health may suffer as well, as they receive the downstream detritus of the processed-food industry.

As a white middle-class volunteer at a food pantry in Portland, I often felt the oppression and racism inherent in the emergency-food system as I was encouraged to prevent low-income persons, often of color, from taking an extra can of tuna or package of frozen hamburgers. As someone who accepted emergency food for investigative purposes, I experienced the resentment that comes from being processed, scrutinized, and admonished. It is a system that, to paraphrase Robert Egger, founder of the L.A. Kitchen and a longtime anti-hunger activist, redeems the giver rather than liberates the receiver.

Food banks have become, in the words of a former East Coast Food Bank CEO, mainstream, rich, and respectable, akin to museums or hospitals as venerable institutions in their community. They have also become appendages of the food industry, recipients of their donations, waste, volunteers, and logistical support. I discovered that of 2,586 people who make up Boards of three-quarters of all the Food Banks affiliated with Feeding America, 22 percent worked for a Fortune 1000 company or its equivalent. (Only two worked for a labor union.)

It is not just the food industry that heavily support food banks, but companies in virtually every part of the U.S. economy. (Continued on pg. 13)

In 2015, the 11 primary domestically oriented anti-hunger groups reported receiving food and cash from more than 150 corporations. Hunger relief has become quite a marketable cause because of the universal repugnance that people go hungry in the world's richest nation. Supporting feeding efforts is a safe way for corporations to enhance their reputations as caring companies, without threatening their profits.

To maintain their status as "mainstream, rich and respectable," food banks all too often fail to address the causes of hunger, for fear of alienating their corporate donors and individuals, from all political views, who make annual gifts.

Only a handful or two of the nation's 200 or more food banks advocate on anti-poverty policies such as minimum-wage increases, affordable housing, and the Affordable Care Act. For example, when the City Council in Washington, D.C., passed legislation in 2013 requiring that Walmart workers receive at least \$12.50 an hour as a condition for the company's entry into the nation's capital, neither D.C. Hunger Solutions nor the Capital Area Community Food Bank, the two largest anti-hunger groups in the capital, both funded by Walmart, endorsed that bill. This nexus between corporate America and anti-hunger groups has become a hunger-industrial complex, akin to the military industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned us about. There are few incentives to actually seek to end hunger, as it would be bad for business on all levels.

Corporate Money

Many anti-hunger groups will go to great lengths to gain and keep their access to corporate dollars.

In the case of Feeding America, it has encouraged cause-marketing partnerships with the food industry that promotes efforts to feed the poor by encouraging people to buy more



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cookies, cheesecake, Snickers, and Pop Tarts, amid a diabetes and obesity epidemic. Share Our Strength purports to end childhood hunger but doesn't actively support minimum-wage increases. Instead, the group receives funding from National Restaurant Association, the main force against raising the tipped minimum wage for restaurant servers.

Hunger Free America runs, ironically, a "nutrition service corps" financed by...Pepsi. The Food Research and Action Center, the main anti-hunger lobbying organization, lobbies with the soda industry to ensure that the recipients of the government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs be allowed to continue purchasing soda under the SNAP program, benefiting the soda industry to the tune of roughly \$6.5 billion every year. The Center even requested that the Harvard School of Public Health refrain from publishing research results about the poor diet of SNAP recipients because the group believed that those results were harming the passage of SNAP in the 2014 Farm Bill.

We can change the way things work today:

- Let's make food banks obsolete in the next 20 years, if not sooner. Achieving this will include developing new indicators of success. Food Banks should set benchmarks, such as dedicating 10 percent of their budgets to policy advocacy and organizing by 2022. They should stop holding canned-food drives by the end of 2018 and pledge not to build larger warehouses.

- Anti-hunger groups should invest in leadership development to bring more current and former food-pantry clients and food stamp recipients onto boards of directors and advisory committees.

- We should build on the incredible amount of innovation by anti-hunger advocates. The Closing the Hunger Gap network, led by WhyHunger shows how cutting-edge food banks are reinventing themselves to focus on distributing only healthy food, stomping out racial inequities in their networks, promoting economic-development strategies in cities and towns and undertaking policy advocacy to tackle the root causes of hunger

- We need to redefine what it means to "fight hunger." Let's refocus our efforts on promoting the public health, ensuring economic justice, and democratizing the economy.

Andrew Fisher is co-founder of the Community Food Security Coalition- which stimulated the growth of the food movement - and ran it for 17 years. His book "Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance Between Corporate America and Anti-Hunger Groups" was released in May 2017 by MIT Press. Andrew Fisher's website: www.bighunger.org