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Hunger in Maine:

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2010 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released its annual hunger data. Maine is now second in the nation for "very low food security" and ninth for "food insecurity" (Campaign to Promote Food Security in Cumberland County 2010). This highly sophisticated indicator of food insecurity has been measured closely by the USDA since 1995. Previously called "hunger," the USDA changed the vernacular to very low food security in 2006 when hunger in the nation continued to rise and the USDA wanted to describe ranges of food insecurity. The methods used to assess household food security remained the same, so statistics are comparable.

The USDA defines very low food security as missing multiple meals during an extended period of time or eating food that is inappropriate for that meal. Food insecurity is defined as the consistent worry about having enough income to pay for household food needs and if not, how to provide food for their family. Without making change and finding solutions, these numbers are expected to rise. Feeding America (2010) predicts a 50 percent increase in the number of seniors facing hunger by 2025, and U.S. Census data reveal that Maine is one of the oldest states in the nation. A solution-oriented approach to hunger in Maine will help now and protect elders in the future.

Though there are many suppositions as to why Maine has the second highest rate of hunger in the nation, there are no clear answers. Some of the factors include the relative scarcity of livable-wage jobs, high housing and heating costs, and an aging population with high medical costs. Though Maine has wonderful agricultural and fishing bases for certain crops and markets, it is a vastly wooded state, lacking the long growing season for backyard gardens that many of our country's poorer southern states have, where people are able to can and preserve foods from the garden. Food is more expensive and available in smaller quantities because the state is at the end of the U.S. trucking lines (Beck et al., this issue). Yet Maine is far from the poorest state, and further adding to the mystery, our neighbor New Hampshire has the lowest rates of hunger in the nation.

Whatever the reasons for Maine's poor national ranking, there is no question that the problem is being dealt with on several fronts, including both governmental and nongovernmental efforts. Ultimately, solving the problem of hunger in Maine and the nation lies in trying to solve its root causes. In this article, however, our concern is with food-assistance programs to feed the hungry now. We begin with a brief review of federal food-assistance programs, which are covered in greater detail by Schumacher, Nischan and Simon (this issue). Then, we provide an extensive description of nongovernmental anti-hunger programs in Maine. Government programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly called food stamps; the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance for Women Infants and Children (WIC) program; school lunch and breakfast programs; and commodity programs that distribute surplus food. Nongovernmental programs include food pantries, soup kitchens, and food banks, along with a number of recent innovative public-private partnerships. We conclude some with some thoughts on how to work toward achieving a "hunger-free" Maine.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Fifty years ago President John F. Kennedy signed his first executive order titled, "Providing for an Expanded Program of Food Distribution to Needy Families." This pilot program expanded over the years to be what is

known in Maine today as the Food Supplement Program. Originally called food stamps, the federal government appropriately changed the program name to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), with states individualizing their program's name.

This food supplement program is the most significant resource in fighting hunger in Maine, offering independence, food choice, and flexibility for people working toward self-sufficiency. When capabilities for online electronic application are launched in Maine this summer, people who are hesitant to ask for assistance at a Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) office or who cannot get to the county office during business hours because of work commitments will be able to apply online in the privacy of their own home. With SNAP benefits distributed through an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card, the working poor can shop for their children where it's convenient, elders can buy the nutritious food they need while maintaining respect and privacy, and business—from farmers to producers to shopkeepers—gain the economic benefit. Based on USDA research, it is estimated that each $1 in food supplement benefits generates nearly twice that in economic activity in the local economy (Hanson and Golan 2002).

WIC (Women, Infants and Children)

WIC is another successful federal anti-hunger program. It provides vouchers for selected healthy foods for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and for infants and children up to age five. WIC vouchers can be used for healthy foods such as milk, eggs, fruits, vegetables, cereal, and infant foods; and in the summer, vouchers are given for produce from Maine farmers. Currently there is a proposal in the federal budget to cut WIC by 10 percent. Such a reduction to a successful, working program will mean food pantries will find mothers with infants in line seeking baby food and formula.

National School Lunch Program: Maine's Participation

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides both commodity and cash support for the purchase of food to provide nutritionally balanced, reduced-price or free lunches for children every day during the school year. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level ($23,803 per year for a family of three) are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level ($33,874 per year for a family of three) are eligible for reduced-price meals. According to the Maine Department of Education, 45 percent of Maine school children are eligible to receive a free or reduced lunch. Schools participating in the NSLP get donated commodities from USDA and are reimbursed for each meal served. The current reimbursement rate is $2.72 for a "free" lunch and $2.32 for a "reduced" lunch. For the 2007–2008 school year, more than $25 million came to Maine in federal reimbursements for school lunches (USDA FNS 2011b).

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School meals provide a vital nutrient source for Maine's children living in poverty and are a budget stretcher for their hardworking families. When school vacation arrives, many food pantries report an increase in families. Extra long lines are caused by families who are barely making ends meet during the school year and must provide between five and 10 extra meals per week for each child. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is designed to ensure that children can get meals during the summer months. Through the SFSP, school districts and local agencies provide free meals to children at a variety of locations, including parks, schools, community centers, churches, housing complexes, and nonprofit organizations. Sponsors are reimbursed for meals served to eligible children up to $3.25 per lunch. The SFSP may be offered to all children at any site where more than 50 percent of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the NSLP or if census tract data supports the

need. Known as "open sites," they are permitted to serve free meals to any child who shows up and are the easiest sites to administer (www.fns.usda.gov).

Maine currently ranks 26th in the nation for accessing available federal dollars for summer feeding programs (FRAC 2011). Only 16 percent of children eligible for the SFSP in Maine are receiving a meal in the summer. In Piscataquis County, a county with a population of 16,795 and 24.8 percent of its children living in poverty, only one program exists. Four of Maine's 16 counties have no sites for children to obtain a meal during the summer: Franklin, Hancock, Knox and Lincoln (Maine DOE 2010). According to the Kids Count Data Center web site, child poverty in these counties ranges from 18.3 percent (Hancock) to 21.5 percent (Franklin).

Commodity Programs

The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) was established in 1969 and administers the nutrition-assistance programs including SNAP and WIC. FNS programs that provide food to food pantries and soup kitchens are less direct and more complicated to follow. A major source of food for many of these programs is The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), a commodity program. Originally established in 1933 as the Commodity Credit Corporation, its purpose was to boost farm prices and help farmers suffering from the Great Depression. A 1994 USDA Economic Research Service report found that for every $1 USDA spends for TEFAP commodities, farmers and producers receive between 27 and 85 cents, one of the highest rates of farm return of any federal nutrition program (Levedahl, Ballenger and Harold 1994).

TEFAP was first authorized in 1981 to distribute surplus foods to households. At a time when the economy was weak and unemployment, homelessness, and hunger were rising, there was also an increase in the amount of commodities available, which schools were unable to absorb. TEFAP expanded to food pantries and soup kitchens. Ultimately under the 1990 federal Farm Bill, the name of the program changed from "Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program to TEFAP, acknowledging the intractability of the fight against hunger. Similarly, unable to make headway in ending hunger, many food pantry providers stopped referring to themselves as "emergency" food pantries (USDA FNS 2010).

The USDA buys TEFAP food, processes, packs, and ships it to Maine and other states. The amount received by each state depends on unemployment and poverty level data, and is updated every few years based on survey and census data. In Maine, TEFAP is administered using the same formula and is distributed by local community action programs in all counties, except for Cumberland County, where a food rescue agency is the distributing agency. These agencies distribute TEFAP commodities to area organizations such as food pantries and soup kitchens. It is important to note that pantry volunteers have to pick up the commodities from the distribution agency.

Each year, the USDA publishes a list of the types and quantities of commodities they expect to purchase from farmers and producers during the coming year. These include canned and dried fruits, canned vegetables, fruit juice, peanut butter, rice, beans, and cereal. States may select the TEFAP entitlement foods they are interested in. In addition to the food that USDA purchases, it provides surplus or bonus commodities. Bonus purchases are made at the discretion of the Secretary of Agriculture to effectively stabilize market prices for at-risk commodities and help to boost farm income. Bonus foods are offered only as they become available through agricultural surplus. Bonus commodities are available for food pantries to pick up between TEFAP distributions. Bonus foods, as opposed to entitlement foods, are unpredictable, susceptible to delays and cancellations, and communities have no input into purchasing decisions (USDA FNS 2010).

Though many food pantries and soup kitchens rely on TEFAP as a major food source, there are several problems that impede broader use. In southern Maine, fewer than half of food pantries access TEFAP, citing several reasons. One reason given was that the amount and variety of USDA commodities vary greatly from month to month. This unreliability means food pantries have to depend on other sources for food to provide a balance of nutritional choices. Between 2002 and 2007, USDA bonus commodities coming to Maine decreased from more than three million pounds of food to less than 300,000 pounds. This translates to more than $2.2 million of food in 2002 to approximately $500,000 in

2007. During the intervening years, many local food pantries were not informed or aware of the cause of the precipitous decline. The interactions between food providers and the TEFAP system have suffered from haphazard and incomplete communication. At this same time, according to the USDA, Maine's rate of food insecurity, not surprisingly, rose more rapidly than any other state in the nation. Year after year, food pantry lines were getting longer and shelves were bare more often, but there was no clear channel of communication about national shortages that would create great impact on local communities and no concerted effort to work together to offset the loss.

Furthermore, in addition to needing adequate storage, TEFAP foods must be kept in a locked facility. In the case of those providers occupying shared space, which is the situation for many pantries residing in church and town hall basements, the food must be kept in a separate, locked area. This mandate prevents some food pantries from qualifying for this food source. Additionally, food pantries have difficulty transporting TEFAP foods. Other FNS programs provide reimbursement that can cover transportation and staff time, but there is no administrative funding available through TEFAP to cover these additional costs to food pantries.

TEFAP eligibility restrictions also make distribution more complicated and confusing for food pantries. The guidelines instruct distributing agencies to serve people who are at or below 185 percent of the poverty level, with an exception that states: "You also may be eligible to receive food from TEFAP if your income is greater than shown in the above table providing you are unable to meet the nutritional needs of your household due to an emergency situation." Food pantries are given a one page self-declaration TEFAP form with this information and are asked to collect this form from their clients once a year. The intent and instructions for the self-declaration form are, unfortunately, misinterpreted at times. Although food pantries are not asked to verify or collect information, some pantries assume they must. Others mistakenly ask for or keep detailed income verification information. Some mistakenly turn people away who have an urgent need but are above 185 percent of the poverty level. For many pantries, income guidelines compromise their fundamental philosophy of serving those in need without imposing any barriers.

Finally, receiving TEFAP foods requires food pantries to send a monthly report to their local TEFAP administering agency. The monthly report must include the number of households that received TEFAP food during the month and a monthly inventory of the TEFAP foods distributed and currently available for distribution the following month. For many food pantries this type of information gathering is nearly impossible. Food pantries do not have the time, sophistication, or technology to collect the data or to physically count TEFAP food items going in and out of their inventory. The TEFAP process needs to be streamlined to reduce the burden on food pantries which are already working beyond their capacity to get food to hungry people.

A relatively new FNS program to Maine is the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), which provides food to supplement the diets of low-income mothers with children up to age six and the elderly. In 2003, Maine was put on a waitlist for the CFSP program and was offered the program in 2009. Requesting a caseload of 9,000/month, Maine was granted a caseload of approximately 3,000/month, and a large number of people currently remain on a waitlist.

Unlike TEFAP, CFSP participants need to prove income to receive a pre-packed box, which may include cereal, milk, cheese, canned fruits and vegetables, and canned meat. Participants must be diligent about picking up their CFSP food, and strict punitive measures apply if the person is unable to get to the pickup spot and time. The CFSP program allows for two missed pickups and then eliminates the recipient from the program. Unfortunately, the CFSP program in Maine is targeted largely to elderly people, and it is not unusual for low-income elderly to be ill or otherwise unable to get to a CFSP pickup site. Food pantries that assist the elderly in accessing their CFSP are asked to manage an internal waitlist each month. If someone does not show up to receive the food package the onus is on the pantry volunteers to call the next person on the waitlist to receive the food for that week only. This month-by-month system is confusing and hard to organize for pantry volunteers and CFSP participants (USDA FNS 2011a).

Administered by the Maine Department of Agriculture (DOA), the CFSP is distributed through the same agencies that distribute TEFAP food.

Preble Street

Preble Street integrates social work with soup kitchens and food pantries to afford people the opportunity to find the resources they need to move beyond hunger, to insist that it is not enough to applaud the efforts of the noble citizens who hand out boxes of emergency food, and that food lines are not the most respectful or effective way to address hunger.

In the early 1980s, with policy changes instituted under the Reagan administration and a Democratic Congress, the U.S. Housing and Urban Development budget was decimated by a 77 percent budget cut, and more than $12 billion was cut from the federal food stamp and child nutrition programs. As the emergency shelter system began and evolved in the 1980s in response to these drastic cuts, the emergency food system developed to meet a parallel survival need for food for citizens unable to provide for themselves. At this time, Preble Street was a small, neighborhood-based organization in Portland run solely by a handful of social work student interns under the guidance of Joe Kreisler, chair of the Department of Social Work at the University of Southern Maine. As homelessness and hunger emerged in Portland, Maine, and the rest of the country, Preble Street shifted its emphasis to respond to a growing tragedy.

In 1982, a few dozen people would gather for coffee at Preble Street. By 1990 the resource center provided 200 breakfast meals each day. In the early 1990s the organization moved into a larger facility, the Resource Center, and several other small, independent, volunteer-led emergency soup kitchens joined. Workers combined emergency food service with the social work model of Preble Street and comprehensive health services of Portland's Public Health Department. By the mid 1990s, the combined soup kitchens at the Resource Center served approximately 400 meals each day and were supplemented by a food pantry. By 2008, with a staggering recession in full effect, unmanageable numbers reached 700 meals a day at the soup kitchens and 3,500 meals a week at the food pantry. Preble Street currently serves 1,000 meals each day at its soup kitchens, and serves 150 families who receive groceries at the food pantry weekly. Besides its food programs, Preble Street also has adult and teen day program services and operates residences aimed at reducing homelessness.

Although it was great news that another nutrition program was available in Maine, the initial implementation, application, and distribution process was unclear. There was no outreach conducted and no statewide communication process for disseminating information, leaving agencies and individuals unclear how the program would be administered and how to sign people up. Sadly, proposed federal budget cuts also threaten this essential program. There are also several critical anti-hunger programs that do not directly supply food to food pantries but greatly affect the numbers showing up at those pantries.

NONGOVERNMENTAL ANTI-HUNGER EFFORTS

The U.S. has long had private group and individual charitable efforts to help those in need. Locally, churches, fraternal organizations, and other volunteer groups have tried to fill needs. As hunger became a public issue, the concept of "temporary emergency food assistance" emerged, optimistically presuming that this was a temporary problem that would soon go away. More than 20 years later, the "emergency food system" in Maine remains an emergency, but it is neither temporary nor a system. Hunger relief in Maine is a constant, necessary response with complex, varying factors and without any unifying, cohesive system. All over Maine there are small grassroots efforts emanating from town halls, church basements, and civic groups scrambling purposefully to help feed their neighbors. There are food pantries, soup kitchens, food banking, and food rescue. Recently, there have been efforts to have farmers and home gardeners plant extra crops to help provide additional fresh food for distribution by food pantries and in soup kitchens.

Although there are many private anti-hunger efforts around Maine, to date there is no systematic inventory or list that indicates where they are or exactly how many there are. For the state as a whole, there are an estimated 450 food pantries. Food pantries are disparate church, civic, and community volunteer groups, varying in size, capacity, and mission. Some operate only one day per month, while others are open weekly. Some provide cooked meals along with food to

take home to prepare. Preble Street, as an example, currently serves more than 1,000 meals per day at its several soup kitchens and provides groceries to 150 families weekly from its food pantry (see sidebar).

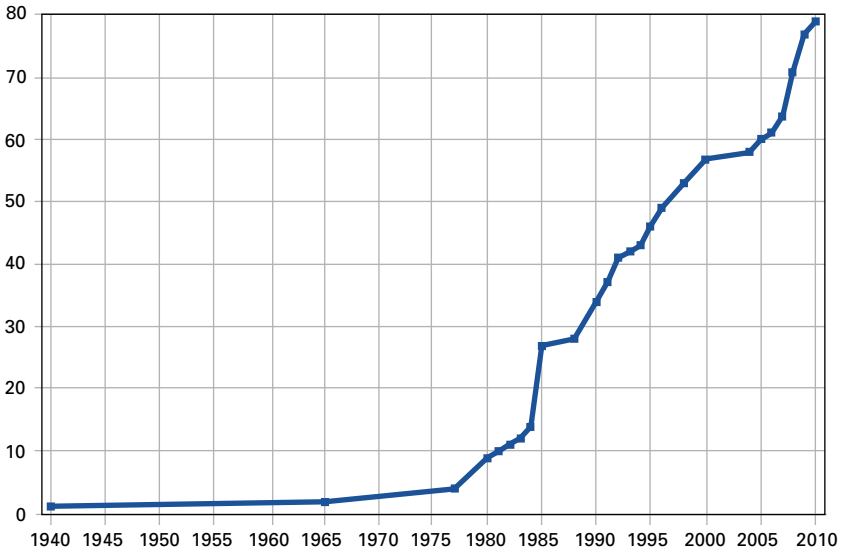
Southern Maine Food Pantries

In 2010, Preble Street's Maine Hunger Initiative (MHI)[1] conducted an analysis of food pantries in Cumberland and York counties in an attempt to put hunger-relief efforts in the spotlight; to foster awareness of the magnitude of the need; and to inspire input and investment in a permanent solution to the plight of the hungry. This is the most heavily populated part of the state, and while the numbers are unique to this region and this survey, the pattern of responses and issues is likely to be similar in other parts of the state. If anything, with higher poverty rates than in southern Maine, the situation may well be worse in other counties.

In Cumberland County, multiple available food pantry lists compiled by reputable organizations initially identified approximately 30 pantries. Through the process of conducting the research and learning of undocumented sites from other pantries in neighboring towns, the comprehensive list grew to a total of 49 pantries in Cumberland County and 31 in York County. In 1940 there was one food pantry in southern Maine. In 1979, there were four pantries. Today there are 80. In the last five years the number of food pantries in York and Cumberland counties has increased by one-third (Figure 1).

Once the 80 pantries had been identified, the MHI conducted a survey of each pantry. Question topics included food sourcing, food choices, volunteers, storage capacity, increase in need, and client documentation and residency requirements. Surveys were conducted in person, over the phone, and by mail. There was a 100 percent return rate in York County and a 96 percent return rate in Cumberland County, which provided remarkable and disturbing data. More than 9,000 households consisting of more than 25,000 individuals were served by food pantries each month in Cumberland and York counties. Pantries report serving 42 percent more people than they did the year before, and 21 percent report increases of 100 percent or more. Half report having no working budget, and of those that have a budget, for 55 percent it is under $500 per month.

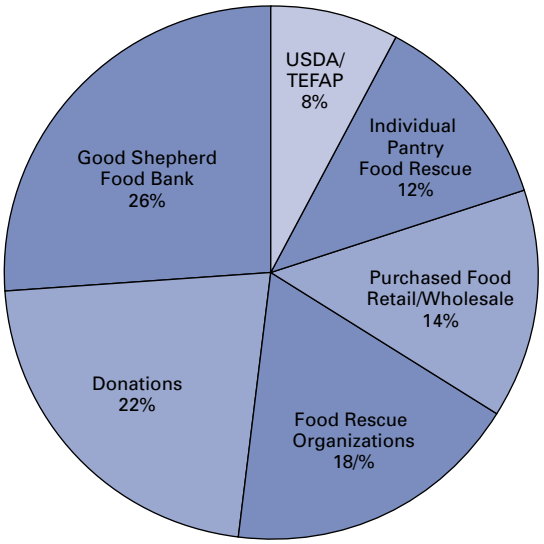
FIGURE 1: **Growth in Food Pantries in Southern Maine**



The majority of southern Maine pantries, nearly 98 percent, rely on volunteers to operate, and 79 percent are solely dependent on volunteers. Volunteers are expected to sort donations, stock shelves, assist clients, load and unload crates of food, manage administrative tasks, and raise money. Pantries in southern Maine experience hardships with transportation and storage capacity. Eighty-seven percent report they cannot get food delivered and must rely on volunteers to pick up donated and purchased food with their personal vehicles. Another 36 percent report they do not have enough space to operate their pantry oftentimes lacking on-site refrigeration and freezer space.

The analysis of southern Maine food pantries also sheds light on the experience of people seeking food assistance. Approximately half the pantries are open and allow access once every one to two weeks or as needed; the other half only allow people to use the pantry once a month or less. Some pantries provide a week's worth of food, while others only give enough for a few days. Only 26 percent serve people regardless of residency, meaning 74 percent serve only residents of the town/neighborhood where they are located and possibly the neighboring town. About 40 percent require proof of residence such as a photo ID or utility bill.

FIGURE 2: **Sources of Food in Southern Maine Food Pantries Collectively**



Sixty-eight percent of southern Maine pantries impose eligibility requirements for people to receive a box of food. Some towns require a referral from a staff person at the town hall. Others require multiple forms of information for each household member, including proof of residence, photo ID, social security number, and proof of income.

To deal with the increased need since the start of the recent deep recession, 82 percent of southern Maine pantries report having had to give less food or to turn people away. In a time of unprecedented hunger in Maine, it is alarming that food pantries rely wholly on volunteers, have little or no budgets, and yet are expected to be sustainable and to meet communities' needs.

The Maine Hunger Initiative's southern Maine survey results provided a litany of difficulties that face neighbors on both sides of the food table: what stands in the way of food security for the hungry and the obstacles helpers face. Similar problems are likely to be encountered throughout the state.

Getting a marriage license in Maine can require less documentation then getting a box of donated food. For people trying to feed their families by resorting to a food pantry, it can be a difficult and humiliating process. Sometimes a family must access a pantry several times a month just to keep food on the table. Residential requirements are a hardship to those who want to access pantries outside of the town they live because of embarrassment, availability of transportation, or hours that coincide with their work hours.

Volunteers also face difficult decisions when operating a pantry on limited resources. Many aging volunteers can no longer handle the physical tasks of pantry operations. A volunteer might have to drive hours to secure food from the food bank. Survey results indicate that southern Maine food pantries obtain their food from a variety of sources, some more consistent and accessible than others (Figure 2). Many pantries that would like to increase capacity have to turn away food (and clients) because they lack adequate storage for perishable, frozen, and dry foods.

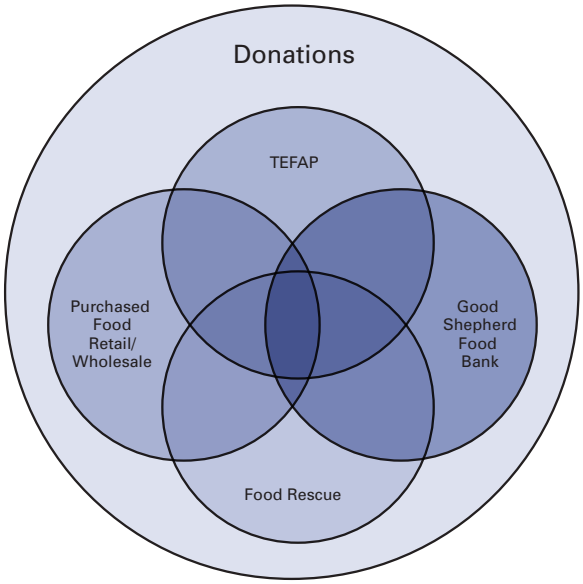
The Good Shepherd Food Bank and the DOA can provide lists of their member organizations, but do not currently clearly differentiate which are food pantries, which are soup kitchens, which are halfway houses, which are drop-in centers, which are transitional housing programs, which are after school programs, and which are camps. Food pantries are a minority of the organizations the food bank serves. There are many other food pantries that do not receive food from either source, including 40 percent of the pantries in southern Maine who were not members of the food bank and 35 percent who did not receive USDA TEFAP foods. Figure 3 is a schematic that illustrates how complex food sourcing is for food pantries.

FOOD RESCUE AND THE CHARITY MODEL

Feeding America is the nation's largest private provider to the charitable food system. The organization distributes eight million pounds of food to more than 200 food banks throughout the country each day (Feeding America 2010). Food banks, as the name implies, collect and store donated and wholesale food and redistribute it to local food pantries. Maine's sole food bank is the Good Shepherd Food Bank, headquartered in Auburn, with additional warehouses in Brewer and Portland. Food pantries purchase food from the food bank, pick it up, transport it, unload it, sort it, and distribute it.

Soon after the advent of food banking, and reacting to the culture of overconsumption in America, "food rescue" also became a popular practice. Food rescue

FIGURE 3: **Complexity of Food Sourcing**



Source: Maine Department of Health and Human Services

involves collecting and distributing prepared foods donated by colleges, hospitals, restaurants, hotels and food vendors. While sharing leftover food seems like a common-sense way to avoid waste and do some good, its availability is inconsistent and therefore difficult to control; it can be unsafe; and it presents challenges to pantries with limited hours and storage capacity.

By the 1990s, an extensive and in some places in the nation, well-organized charitable food movement had been built. Throughout the country, hunger became an issue that Americans felt they could do something about. Countless food drives, empty bowl dinners, cans of food in lieu of admission fees, walk-athons, and canned-food donation boxes emerged. From Boy Scouts to letter carriers and race car drivers, people who know there is something inherently wrong with hunger in our country, do their best to respond in a charitable way.

The private, charitable instinct in America is admirable, strong, and critical to keeping our neighbors fed. However, in a model that relies on charity to fill a basic need, there are problems of reliability, appropriateness, adequacy, and consistency. There are often too many cans of pumpkin, and never enough meat, dairy, and fresh produce on food pantry shelves. The legacy of our state depends on the health and well-being of our citizens. We need a food access system for all Mainers that is dependable, accountable, and trustworthy.

The fundamental questions should be whether standing on lines for donated food is the best system for feeding citizens in a wealthy, democratic nation today. Can a model built on a foundation of erratic charity protect Maine's citizens from hunger? Has the unintended consequence of our charitable zeal been to cloud awareness of the loss of food access through public entitlements?

In the Clinton administration's 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (AKA "Welfare Reform"), there were deep cuts to food stamp eligibility, benefits, and child nutrition programs. These severe blows to the foundation of a benevolent society were overshadowed by the public attention garnered by the good work being done by charity. Instead of outrage at the effect of the "sledge-hammer" that had been taken to government programs for the public good, the focus shifted to the kind gestures of folks who scrambled to patch up the holes and shore up the joists in a crumbling structure.

There was no attempt to study the feasibility of the charity model, to test its capacity or its ability to improve the health and well-being of those forced to rely on it. In this political climate there is an uncomfortable parallel to the late Latin American archbishop Dom Helder Camera's famous quote, "When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food they call me a communist." The goodness of the private charitable model too often prevents examination of the failure of public policy to keep Maine's children, elderly, disabled and working poor, nourished.

NORTHEAST ANTI-HUNGER WORK

Food banks, nonprofits, and advocacy groups in other states provide examples of ways to end hunger. There are great models of organizations that are front and center in advocating for systems' change, so not only will hungry people be fed but the problems that cause hunger will begin to be addressed and systems created to address the conditions that perpetuate hunger.

For example, Hunger Free Vermont partnered with the Vermont Food Bank to support legislation to address the problem of childhood hunger during the summer (www.hungerfreevt.org). The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute leads an energetic coalition that provides trainings on benefit access and organizes efforts to advocate for good public policy (www.mlri.org). End Hunger Connecticut has partnered with the AARP to take the stigma out of SNAP for the elderly, and enlisted many elders in the program through its cooperative public/private effort (www.endhungerct.org). NERAHN, the North East Regional Anti-Hunger Network, is a partnership of Bread for the World, the Food Research and Action Center and two organizations representing each of the seven northeast states, whose member meet regularly to learn from each other (www.nerahn.org).

Anti-hunger work does not mean opening up more emergency food sites, but rather learning best practices from successful efforts, which includes taking stands on public policies and initiating new ones.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships between private and government entities are providing additional mechanisms to address hunger in Maine. Preble Street, Maine DHHS and private funders formed a unique partnership which brought more than a million dollars of ARRA ("recovery act") emergency food funding to Maine. This provided 13,897 of the poorest families across the state, families with minor children and annual incomes of less than $9,000 per year, with $100 grocery card food supplements.

The Anti-Hunger and Opportunity Corps VISTA program brought two volunteers to Maine to provide technical assistance for emergency food pantries in Cumberland County. In addition to helping build sustainable organizational practices, the VISTAs are, as USDA Under Secretary for Food and Nutrition Services Kevin Concannon told the volunteers at the swearing-in ceremony, "helping remind people that in our midst, in this country of plenty, there are millions of people who are struggling." The two volunteers in Maine join others working in 18 states across the country in helping people who are on food pantry lines apply for federal SNAP benefits. A survey of people accessing food pantries in Cumberland County revealed that approximately one-third may be eligible for these benefits but have not applied. As electronic application access becomes available, the VISTAs will be equipped with laptops and able to help people while they stand on food lines.

Cultivating Community is another Maine organization working to end hunger, to strengthen communities by growing food, preparing youth leaders and new farmers, and promoting social and environmental justice; it offers double coupon values at their farm stands to people who use EBT cards there. They are making local organic produce affordable to low-income people and investing food supplement dollars in Maine communities.

The MHI Farm to Pantry project, modeled after the USDA successful Farm to School program, contracted with local farmers to grow specifically for neighboring food pantries. In this market-based model that complements philanthropic dollars invested in ending hunger, low-income families at food pantries get fresh local produce; food pantries have an additional resource; and the farmers use contract money to strengthen their businesses. Last year MHI piloted the initiative in southern Maine with a grant from the Sam L. Cohen Foundation, and this year, with a grant from TDBank, will replicate that efficient food system model work.

Working with well-informed, respected, and experienced organizations—AARP Maine, Maine Center for Economic Policy, Maine Council of Churches, Maine Equal Justice Partners, Muskie School of Public Service—the MHI will provide a statewide voice specific to hunger, raise awareness, research and evaluate best practices that have been successful elsewhere, and lead public policy advocacy efforts to introduce policies and laws to alleviate hunger in Maine.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: BELIEVE IN A HUNGER-FREE MAINE

The ultimate answer to ending hunger is a strong economy with livable wage jobs, affordable housing and affordable healthcare. Until then, Maine needs to support policies which maintain the safety net that keeps residents healthy. There also needs to be

advocacy for improved access to federally funded food and nutrition programs. Investment in public/private partnerships that work efficiently and effectively to address hunger should be strengthened.

Some specific actions in Maine could make a real difference in the short run. For example, currently there are efforts with the Department of Education to bring food pantry coordinators, the food service industry, schools, social service agencies, and community partners together in Cumberland County to expand summer meal sites so that hundreds more children can access nutritious meals this summer. Underutilized federal monies available to feed Maine's poorest and hungry children should be more aggressively pursued and legislation introduced that can ensure that. Maine should also target a USDA demonstration project that provides extra SNAP funds through EBT cards to low-income families with school-age children during the summer months. For a mostly rural state with long distances between homes and summer feeding sites, it makes much more economic and environmental sense to help parents feed their children at home.

It is important to note that despite these obvious options for improving access to food, they represent piecemeal efforts and need to be examined individually and together to determine the most effective cohesive approach to redirect and invigorate successful hunger relief efforts. Joel Berg, in his book, *All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America?*, has a colorful, fold-out chart labeled, "What is the Best Way to End Hunger in the US?" (Berg 2008). In 1996, there were 35.5 million Americans who were food insecure. By doubling the nation's charitable food system, food insecurity would be reduced to affect 32 million Americans. If federal nutrition-assistance programs, however, were increased by 10 percent, it would decrease food insecurity to 26.7 million Americans. If federal nutrition programs were increased by 41 percent, we would successfully eliminate food insecurity in America.

Absent increases in federal nutrition programs, food pantries will continue feeding their neighbors and participating in advocacy efforts to improve public policies to try to end hunger. Collaborations between social service agencies and food pantries must be created to provide application assistance to nutrition programs and employment and casework services for other assistance that will help people and families become food secure. Faith communities can lead the way in both charity and advocacy, as the Maine Council of Churches has done with their General Assistance project, educating low-income people on accessing programs that will help them get food and other basic needs met.

What if every person who earns below Maine's livable wage qualified for food supplement benefits? What if food supplement benefits were tied to local foods such as produce, dairy, eggs, meat, and fish and added economic value to the local community while minimizing the environmental damage from transporting food great distances? If no one were hungry, children would do better in school; the elderly would be healthier; working families could improve and invest in their neighborhoods; local farmers, fishers and shopkeepers would reap economic benefits.

Our country decided to have clean, running water in all communities, everyone benefited from it, and today no other way of living is imaginable. If policy is enacted to truly end hunger, all would benefit and we would no longer be able to imagine another way of living.

ENDNOTE

1. Information about Cumberland County food pantries presented in this section comes from Preble Street's Maine Hunger Initiative web site: (www.preblestreet.org/mainehungerinitiative.php).

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