

Testimony of Bill Bolling
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Hearing on Federal Food Assistance Programs: Successes and Challenges
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Mr. Chairman, and Senator Chambliss, I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I'm Bill Bolling, founder and executive director of the Atlanta Community Food Bank. I'm here representing the Atlanta Community Food Bank, which serves 38 counties in north Georgia, eight food banks of the Georgia Food Bank Association, as well as America's Second Harvest - The Nation's Food Bank Network.

America's Second Harvest - The Nation's Food Bank Network is the largest hunger relief organization in the country. Second Harvest member food banks serve all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Nearly every community in the United States is served by America's Second Harvest food banks through a local network of food pantries, congregant feeding programs, after school programs, and programs that serve the elderly. This work is accomplished through programs operated by congregations of every religious persuasion, civic organizations, and social welfare agencies. More than 50,000 local programs are included in this system of private sector support for the poor and needy in our communities.

Mr. Chairman and Senator Chambliss, I have been a food bank director for over 27 years and have worked to feed the hungry for over 32 years. I was one of the first directors in our food bank network and in fact helped establish America's Second Harvest 26 years ago. In that time, I have seen a dramatic increase in the problem of hunger and the complexities of hunger and poverty in Atlanta, north Georgia, and around the country. And as the problem has grown worse, the profiles of the people affected by the threat of hunger have changed. Long gone is the day when the chronically unemployed and homeless men represented the majority of the people we serve. Today many of the people receiving food assistance from our partner programs are working. They are most likely not receiving welfare, and are often faced with the challenges of finding affordable housing and adequate health care. Today, we see too many kids in soup kitchen lines, too many working parents at congregational food pantries, and too many elderly people having to choose between paying utility bills and eating.

Two months ago, the United States Department of Agriculture released its annual prevalence estimates of food insecurity. These USDA estimates are an objective and authoritative measure of the state of food insecurity in our nation. Setting aside for the moment the unfortunate wording changes in definitions of food insecurity and hunger, these prevalence estimates are

generated by a highly reputable agency of the Federal government, under the direction of very bright and talented researchers. In short, Mr. Chairman, the USDA statistics are viewed as the final and authoritative word on the problem of hunger in America.

Unfortunately, the most recent USDA prevalence estimates find that more than one-in-ten American households - including some 35 million people in all - live in food insecure households. Of those 35 million people deemed food insecure - in Georgia, like the rest of the country, we just call them hungry people - more than 12 million are children. In Georgia, we have the 14th worst rate of food insecurity in the nation, with more than 12 percent of Georgia households deemed by USDA as food insecure.

In addition to the USDA estimates of food insecurity, America's Second Harvest also conducts independent research on the hunger problem and measures how well food banks are doing as they work to address this problem. Nationally, an estimated 25 million [unduplicated] people - including nine million children and nearly three million seniors -received emergency food assistance from our network food banks in 2005. That represents an eight percent increase over 2001 and an eighteen percent increase from a decade ago.

On any given week - this week, for example - four and a half million people are lined up for emergency food boxes at pantries or for hot meals at community kitchens. More than a third of the people served by our food programs - 36 percent - are employed. And of our emergency food recipients - 70 percent of the households were deemed food insecure using the USDA standards.

But national statistics can often be too abstract. So let me bring it home - to my home in Georgia. The Atlanta Community Food Bank serves north Georgia, from the city of Atlanta, its suburbs, small towns, and rural areas of 38 counties stretching all the way to the Tennessee and South Carolina border. Last year, the Atlanta Community Food Bank served more than 300,000 different needy people in a community of over four million. Of the 426,000 people estimated by the Census to live in poverty in our community - three-fourths had, at some time, turned to our partner agencies for food and services. This is incredible and shameful in a nation so blessed by a strong economy and agricultural abundance.

On any given week in north Georgia, some 42,000 different people receive food assistance from the Atlanta Community Food Bank through local, volunteer led, community based agencies. These numbers matter because they allow you to see the challenge we face in Georgia and in food banks and hunger relief organizations all across the country. Food banks and their agencies are the last defense against hunger for many low-income and working families. It is a good thing that this network of food banks and community based agencies exists, because more and more we are seeing people who must give up buying food at the grocery store so they can pay the rent, the power bill, address a health emergency, or just put shoes on their children's feet.

The food bank system was created to meet the hunger need in our communities by securing private donations of food and surplus government commodities, warehousing those donations and then distributing these to partner agencies. Food banks are the lynchpin in a massive network of private, charitable hunger relief that operates in nearly every community throughout

the nation.

The local agency system in north Georgia and around the country is largely comprised of faith-based entities, with three-fourths of the pantries in our system being part of the community support of churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. These local hunger relief agencies reflect the very best of America, the broad array of America's social fabric and religious life. And they are a reflection of the public and private sector successfully working together to address a major public health issue.

Our agencies rely heavily on volunteers to provide hunger relief, with two-thirds of our partner programs relying entirely on volunteer support. The volunteers in our system are crucial to our work. An estimated one million different people comprise the volunteer work-force around the country. They provide an average of 53 hours of labor annually, or put another way, they donate a full-time work week plus overtime each year to help their needy neighbors. Using the current minimum wage, the value of volunteer labor in our network in a typical week is estimated at \$8.2 million.

The volunteers that keep our system moving don't just ladle soup or pack food boxes. They provide additional support to needy families that come to the pantries for assistance. Often times the lack of food is just the presenting problem and the beginning of a relationship toward self sufficiency. Partner agencies provide after school tutoring, community support to seniors, counseling and training for jobs, housing support, mental health services, and an array of other support services that transform lives. Using a commodity that we have an abundance of - food - we are able to engage, educate, and empower people toward self sufficiency. This is the transformation that food programs provide everyday.

Our charitable food system has changed and become more sophisticated as the face of hunger has changed. The need for much better food stamp referrals is based on the reality that less than one-third (30%) of the people we serve are enrolled in the Food Stamp Program, even though more than two-thirds are income eligible (68% with household incomes below the Federal poverty level). We provide utility assistance and referrals to other public programs because the research shows that 42 percent of those we serve had to choose between buying food or paying their utility bills, 35 percent had to choose between buying food and paying their rent or mortgage, and 32 percent had to choose between buying food and paying for medicine or medical care.

Mr. Chairman, these facts cannot be acceptable in a nation as wealthy as ours. We are the last remaining superpower and yet we allow nine million children a year to rely on private charity to ensure that they don't go to bed hungry. We must do better. This Committee has an opportunity in the upcoming Farm Bill reauthorization to help reduce hunger and support the very effective efforts of the emergency food system to meet the hunger needs in their communities.

The food bank system is a public - private partnership that has evolved to work remarkably well over the last two decades. With the support of farm commodities acquired by the government and donated to food banks, as well as funds for distribution and storage costs, we have created a partnership that has been a remarkable success. In recent years, the USDA has been able to help hundreds of thousands of people devastated by natural disasters by facilitating

food stamp emergency benefits and moving thousands of pounds of commodities to disaster affected areas. We have been privileged to work with the dedicated USDA staff and our own network members and volunteers to help relieve the suffering brought by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Sadly though, this effort has drained or exhausted many of our resources, and government commodity donations were dwindling even before the devastation of the hurricanes.

We have seen in the last four years a trend where public-sector food donations have not adequately kept up with the challenges we face in our communities. Although most of the food we provide to needy families is sourced from the private sector, we rely heavily on Federal commodity programs, especially the Emergency Food Assistance Program (or TEFAP) to stabilize and leverage those private donations.

Since the enactment of the last Farm Bill, there has been a troubling decrease in commodity donations through TEFAP. Since 2003, steadily rising farm commodity prices have reduced the need for USDA to purchase surplus commodities for market support purposes under the Department's Section 32 authority. Although the TEFAP mandatory purchases set by Congress have remained stable, the surplus or bonus commodities - constituting more than half of all TEFAP donations to food banks - have fallen off. In the past two years bonus commodities have fallen by 50 percent. At the same time requests for food assistance have increased by 8 percent or more. Moreover, inventories held to support the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) and support its costs have virtually disappeared, leaving this program under funded when appropriations are not sufficient to offset this shortfall.

It is crucial in the upcoming Farm Bill reauthorization, that Congress increase mandatory food purchases in TEFAP; stabilize the surplus commodities provided to the program through Section 32; and find a way to maintain caseloads in the CSFP when commodity inventories disappear.

I understand that in the upcoming farm bill, the choices may be few and the competing interests many, but in TEFAP and the other commodity donation programs we clearly find mutual and compound interest. Many of the commodities donated to TEFAP, CSFP and other commodity donation programs are acquired to support farm prices and provide a farm safety net. They also serve as a nutrition safety net for millions of our nation's hungry. Moreover, TEFAP commodities offer some of the healthiest and most nutritious food distributed to our agencies. TEFAP commodities stabilize our distribution when private donations are lagging or can help extend private donations enabling the food mix to be more complete.

TEFAP is critical to the estimated 15 million low-income people that access these commodities through food banks and the agencies we serve. The next farm bill offers the opportunity to strengthen this system of farm-to-table for our nation's poor and hungry.

Farmers and ranchers also benefit enormously from TEFAP. TEFAP commodities are most often less processed food meaning that more of the Federal dollar goes to purchasing and less to processing. The commodities typically include canned or frozen meats, rice, corn meal, wheat flour, dried beans, and canned fruit and vegetables. A 1994 USDA report found that TEFAP surplus commodity purchases can provide up to 85 cents in farm gate income for

producers of purchased commodities for each Federal dollar expended in TEFAP. This rate of return when compared to the normal rate of return to farmers is extraordinary.

I know my colleagues on this panel will more specifically testify for the need to enact certain improvements in the Food Stamp Program. I will only add to their testimony that the nation's food banks are committed to continue working with this Committee to improve and strengthen the Food Stamp Program. Food stamps are the cornerstone in the nation's efforts to reduce hunger and help low-income families achieve self-sufficiency.

The Atlanta Community Food Bank and dozens of food banks around the country have participated in Food Stamp Outreach activities with private funding and with the support of USDA. And it is in these public private partnerships that we leverage our resources, build strong networks, and best serve those in need.

In addition to food stamp outreach, the nation's food banks are looking at even more innovative ways to help low-income people apply for the program. In Northern Illinois, for example, an innovative program allows emergency food recipients to apply for food stamps on-line and in real time. If the applicant is approved, they receive their "ebt" card on-site - along with an emergency food box - and can use their food stamp benefits in a matter of days under a modified "expedited" food stamp pilot. This is an example that can be replicated throughout the country and represents another way that through public private collaboration we can save money, cut the error rate, offer better customer service, and effectively fight hunger where it counts.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I appreciate your allowing me to tell my story, and the story of many who are daily engaged in trying to end hunger in our country, one community at a time. Our hope is that the nutrition title of the next farm bill will demonstrate our sincere and continued commitment to ending hunger in America. Efforts to increase access to food stamps for so many of those who are eligible but not participating is one of the fastest ways to succeed in our nation's battle against hunger. With the next farm bill, we can also find creative ways to capitalize on the many potential sources of support for TEFAP and CSFP--- government commodities, industry food donations, private charitable donations, infrastructure and administrative grants, increased volunteers, etc. --- so that these programs can operate with dependable and sufficient resources to meet the ever growing need. We must find a way to ensure that our needy families and children, and elderly find a place at our Farm Bill table.

Thank you for this opportunity.