



Testimony

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Hearing

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Riceland Hall of the Fowler Center at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, Arkansas

Statement of Mrs. Rhonda Sanders

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Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation to testify at today's hearing on the *2023 Farm Bill: Perspectives From the Natural State*. My name is Rhonda Sanders, and I am the CEO of the Arkansas Foodbank, the largest food bank in the state of Arkansas. I am honored to share my perspective today on the work of our food bank in the communities we serve, and how our work adds to the critical work of federal nutrition programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) to address food insecurity in Arkansas and across the country.

The Arkansas Foodbank is the foundation in the fight against hunger and our goal is to find unique pathways to connect people and resources to reach those in need, by providing dignity, hope, and a brighter future for all Arkansans. Our food bank is a member of the Feeding America food bank network. Feeding America is the largest hunger-relief organization in the United States with a network of more than 200 food banks, 21 statewide food bank associations, and over 60,000 partner agencies, food pantries, and meal programs. Like other partner food banks across the country, the Arkansas Foodbank works to end hunger with the food, people, and big ideas needed to ensure our neighbors have the nourishment to lead healthy and productive lives.

I am honored to testify before the committee on the work of our food bank to address hunger, and the impact that nutrition programs authorized by the farm bill have on those facing hunger.

An Overview of our Work

As shown in Feeding America's annual *Map the Meal Gap* study and as we witness in our daily work, food insecurity exists in every county in the nation but can look different from one community to the next. The Arkansas Foodbank believes in a stronger community where hunger needs are met with sufficient access to nutritious food for each household and community served. In the 33-county region Arkansas Foodbank serves, there are nearly 300,000 people who were considered food-insecure in 2021. We worked with over 400 partner agencies, community nonprofit partners, schools and faith-based organizations across our service area last year to distribute over 37 million pounds of food which is enough food to provide approximately 30 million meals. Beyond providing healthy meals, we work with our agencies and local partners to offer other services that connect individuals and families to local providers offering services such as affordable housing options, shelters, rent and utility assistance, free to low-cost health services, job skills, and clothing pantries.

The Arkansas Foodbank provides the most nutritious food we can through the most cost effective, efficient means possible for hungry Arkansans in our service area. We uphold our mission with the trust of our staff, board, donors, volunteers, recipients and partners. Because we receive strong support from donors in the community and the food industry, the Foodbank keeps administrative costs low—less than 4 cents on the dollar—and impact high. This means 96 cents of every dollar donated to the Foodbank goes directly into our hunger-relief programming, including food acquisition.

Most people come to the food bank or our partner agencies at a time of extreme need, a role we are honored to serve. We know it can take a while for these individuals to get back on their feet and that is why we partner closely with a wide variety of community partners as well as farmers, food manufacturers, grocery stores, and others to safely and equitably connect donated food with people facing hunger in our service area. We are uniquely positioned to help serve neighbors throughout our state, including in hard-to-reach rural communities.

Many of the people we serve are working, and yet face food insecurity when a short-term crisis impacts their families. Nationally, almost 32% of people who are food insecure earn above 185% of the federal poverty level, meaning they earn too much to qualify for nutrition programs like SNAP.

Unique Positioning in Serving Hard to Reach Areas (Rural Communities)

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated many existing disparities, including the state of rural hunger. While rural communities play a crucial role in growing the food our country needs, they are much more likely to experience higher rates of food insecurity. Rural communities have been particularly vulnerable during the pandemic because they frequently contain older populations, higher rates of chronic disease, and limited healthcare infrastructure. Last year the Arkansas Foodbank delivered over 16 million pounds of food into rural counties and communities. The distribution of food was done utilizing several methods with local agencies being at the top of the list. Since the COVID-19 pandemic the Arkansas Foodbank has relied more on mobile distributions than in the past. This has been a very effective way for food to be distributed in rural counties that may lack the ability to sustain the number of local agencies needed to meet the needs of their neighbors. In 2021 we did 86 mobile distributions in rural counties and to date in 2022 we have completed 45. These mobiles touched approximately 250 households at each distribution for a total of 21,500 households being served in 2021 and 11,250 so far in 2022.

We also supplement the needs of our rural counties with food credits and capacity building grants to help with supplies and equipment. Additionally, the Arkansas Foodbank has increased the number of deliveries made to our agencies from 30% to 60%. This directly benefits our rural counties whose agencies lack funds for gas and vehicles. By the Arkansas Foodbank delivering directly to more agencies we are able to position more food in hard to reach rural locations than ever before.

Many of the rural counties in Arkansas are not only isolated and less populated, but they are also highly impoverished which adds another layer of difficulty for individuals and families living in these areas. The rural counties with the highest poverty levels and food insecurity levels are in the delta area of Arkansas. The Arkansas Foodbank serves 7 of the 15 Delta counties and the other 8 are served by the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas, our sister Feeding America food bank. The Arkansas Foodbank started a Delta Initiative in 2020 by joining forces with an organization in Phillips County to make a local food bank into a formal branch of the Arkansas Foodbank. By doing this we are able to fully share our resources through the branch and we are active participants in the local economy and culture. The Arkansas Foodbank is facilitating an effort to pull together the key players in Phillips County to identify and implement strategies that will help families move out of poverty and food insecurity into a self-sustaining pathway for living. Several efforts of this group have targeted issues such as, work force education, healthy foods and racial disparities.

Another key strategy the Arkansas Foodbank is using to fight rural hunger is to open our first fully owned and operated pantry in Phillips County. This pantry will be open 3 days a week and will utilize online ordering to allow neighbors facing hunger to select the foods they want and need. Additionally, this pantry will provide healthy food and will connect neighbors seeking food assistance with other resource that are available in their community. The Arkansas Foodbank has made a long term commitment to all of the rural counties we serve but very specifically to counties in the Delta as there are critical infrastructure and capacity needs that must be addressed in those counties to enable people facing hunger to access the food that they need.

When it comes to the neighbors we serve across our 33-county service area, our partnership with the state to distribute USDA food through TEFAP plays a key role in providing access to nutritious food in each county we serve. The program provides critical support, helping us ensure a nutritious balance of food is distributed to families in need by allowing us to combine TEFAP with our other sources of food, including food donated through partnerships with thousands of growers, manufacturers, retailers, and food service companies in our community, as well as food that we purchase. We have also worked with our state to identify underserved areas to target resources provided through USDA’s TEFAP Reach and Resiliency grants and the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) grants. In addition, we have been able to increase both public and private partnerships across the state, especially when it comes to supporting local farmers and growers.

Since January 1, 2021 the Arkansas Foodbank distributed 13.7 million pounds of TEFAP product in our service area and 7.2 million pounds of that TEFAP product went into rural counties. The TEFAP product in the Arkansas Foodbank service area is distributed through 90+ local agencies. We also utilize other USDA food opportunities like CSFP and, during the height of the pandemic, CFAP (Farm to Family) food boxes. The chart below reflects the amount of pounds distributed in our entire service area and in the rural counties in our service area.

	CSFP Since January 1, 2021	TEFAP since January 1, 2021	CFAP during 2020 & 2021
Urban County Distribution	234,886	6,501,588	3,797,826
Rural County Distribution	443,754	7,244,458	4,824,693
Total Distribution	678,640	13,746,046	8,622,519

Covid-19 Impacts and Effect Across the Nation, Including Arkansas

In reflecting on what has taken place over the past two years, the pandemic presented a perfect storm for the charitable food system (disruptions to the supply chain, increased need for help, shifts to distributions models for safety protocols), and we are still feeling those effects today. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, the public health emergency caused communities to close, unemployment to soar, and, for many, anxiety about paying for and accessing enough food. The financial impacts from the pandemic will take longer for the people we serve to recover from, and we expect need to stay at elevated levels as these families recover.

During the pandemic, we experienced an outpouring of giving and support that made it possible for us to pivot and serve a 30% increase in families seeking assistance. Our food bank was able to distribute more nutritious food to families in need than ever before, and we similarly saw federal nutrition programs pivot to help more people. Support from Congress and USDA helped food banks distribute more food than ever before, and nutrition programs were able to use program flexibilities and waivers to pivot and reach families and children in need, making it easier and more accessible to provide food to the people we serve.

The lines of people needing help might not stretch for 5 miles down the highways anymore, but the need is still there. During the worst of the pandemic, we saw demand increase by 40% in our community. Things have improved, but on average we are still serving 20% more people than we were before the pandemic. We’ve started to see demand rise more sharply as food price inflation has an impact on the community.

Food price increases and supply chain disruptions are affecting food banks, and households’ budgets for millions of families are tightening. Thankfully families on SNAP have experienced a modest adjustment to SNAP benefits due to USDA’s modernization of how SNAP benefit levels are determined. Even so, food price volatility has been a challenge for the families we serve.

Our food bank and others see the impacts of inflation, which impacts almost every aspect of food bank operations including purchasing food, transporting donated food, cold storage costs, and other costs including fuel, wages, and even vehicle maintenance seeing significant increases. During the height of the pandemic, we had TEFAP inventories in our warehouse of 1.6 million pounds of food. This past month the inventory was only at a little over 450,000 pounds. We are seeing an even steeper decline in donated products as food donors are selling everything they have in stock and are unable to replenish their food stock easily. These unique situations are leading us to purchase more product than in the past and pay more due to the cost of product and the competition to acquire the product.

Even though we are working in uncertain and uncharted times we do it because of people like Willie Spriggs who lives in rural Arkansas and is raising his grandchildren. Willie faces difficult situations everyday, and his story is one I want you to hear.

Willie is part of a group of three friends that come the last Tuesday of every month to the food distribution at the Arkansas Foodbank's Delta Branch. Willie arrives around 1:00 am in the morning for the 8:30 am start of the TEFAP distribution. He drives 45 miles round trip to get food each month.

As cars stretched for blocks and blocks behind him Willie shared why he is grateful to receive food. "I love everything I get, the beans, the rice & vegetables. My wife and grandkids love it all too." Willie shared that he and his wife are raising two of their grandkids and that can be challenging on a fixed income of \$925 he gets, and the just over \$500 his wife gets each month. He shared that by getting food each month he can save an extra \$10 here or there and can save up to buy a new pair of tennis shoes or something else the kids need.

He shared one particularly hard month when the food from the Arkansas Foodbank Delta Branch was crucial to them making it that month. They had a really large gas bill and it took all their funds to cover it. "If not for the Foodbank we wouldn't have had groceries that month. Medicare doesn't always pay for all your medicine, or you have to go to the doctor and have a co-pay, this food helps us be able to pay for that. I am proud and glad to get it (the food). I'd drive 50 miles if I had to."

The Arkansas Foodbank learned a lot during the pandemic. We learned how to be flexible, how to change our distribution model to be safe while filling the gap and how to engage an entirely new set of people facing hunger. We are still applying those principles of working smarter and different while being efficient. However, we still need the help of our partners to meet the needs of people like Willie during this time of inflation and service disruption.

Bridging from the 2018 Farm Bill to Opportunity Areas for the 2023 Farm Bill

The Arkansas Foodbank proudly partners with our state to distribute USDA commodities provided through TEFAP and CSFP to our neighbors in need, and we work with the state and other partners like the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance to provide SNAP application assistance, including training local agencies on providing SNAP assistance during their distributions.

The 2018 Farm Bill protected and strengthened SNAP funding, expanded SNAP online retail pilots, provided additional funding for TEFAP, and streamlined CSFP certification. These important investments and changes have provided critical support since enactment of the legislation, particularly the additional TEFAP support that has been critical to our food bank as we have seen a protracted recovery from the economic downturn. For our food bank and the Feeding America network, the increase in TEFAP entitlement funds, combined with additional USDA commodity support purchases and COVID-19 recovery funds for TEFAP, has provided additional food assistance at a time when we needed it most. Unfortunately, the end of temporary USDA food purchase programs has hit our food bank at a time when food prices are higher and the need for food assistance remains elevated.

Food banks and other charitable feeding organizations have demonstrated the critical role they play in immediate food assistance as well as in augmenting gaps in broader food assistance programs. I ask that the Committee include additional mandatory funding for TEFAP food in the next Farm Bill in recognition of the sustained high need for food assistance nationwide. Specifically, TEFAP mandatory funding should be increased to \$450 million per year in the next farm bill and TEFAP Storage and Distribution Funds should increase to \$200 million per year to reflect the actual distribution costs needed.

I also urge the Committee to prioritize investments in the next Farm Bill that increases access to nutritious foods through federal nutrition programs like TEFAP and through innovative models like TEFAP Farm to Food Bank projects, and to protect and strengthen SNAP to ensure our most vulnerable do not lose access to much needed food.

SNAP is one of the most efficient programs that impacts food bank operations, strengthens local economies, and reduces food insecurity and improves the nutrition of millions of people. We know that for every meal the Arkansas Foodbank provides, SNAP is able to provide the equivalent of 9 meals. Strengthening SNAP benefits has a true and immediate impact on our food bank that is already going above and beyond. A higher minimum benefit amount will help those eligible to afford more food and encourage more eligible adults to apply, including seniors, people with disabilities, people working low-wage jobs, and others who are most likely to qualify for the minimum benefit. Additionally, simplifying SNAP applications and recertifications for Seniors and people with disabilities can ease the burden of mobility and transportation challenges while continuing to provide much-needed nutrition assistance.

Like many things we learned over the last two years, we also learned how to make SNAP more efficient and accessible to individuals and families experiencing hunger. We encourage the committee to make permanent COVID flexibilities like telephonic signatures that expedited the process for those in need, shortened recertification periods, and enabling college students to access SNAP benefits. These lessons and so many others provided additional support to overwhelmed food banks and allowed families in need to have food back on their tables through these flexibilities.

The 2023 Farm Bill provides an opportunity for Congress to provide support and assistance to families, communities, and growers in need to reduce food insecurity and ensure our country continues to grow the food needed to help our nation thrive. We know that recovering from COVID's shock to operations and the economy, as a community, will be an ongoing challenge for all of us. Ongoing federal investment and support will be necessary to accelerate and sustain our recovery. This is even more true for food insecure families, whose recovery will be disproportionately harder.

Concluding Thoughts

The Arkansas Foodbank, along with our community partners, is dedicated to ending hunger and strengthening communities and believes the best way to do so is through partnership and collaboration. This work could not be done without the support of government and private stakeholders to support the needs of hungry Arkansans and Americans. The United States has the potential to emerge from this unprecedented crisis stronger and better positioned to meet the evolving needs of communities facing hunger in America with the continued strategic partnership between non-profits and the public sector. The Administration and Congress provided critical investments to our neighbors in need during the peak of the crisis, which ensured children and families facing hunger could put food on the table. Now, we must build on those successes and continue to support our nation's food banks and neighbors facing hunger.

I urge the committee, congress, and the administration to take the lessons learned from COVID and use that insight to create a strong Farm Bill that puts people facing hunger at the center. Purchase more food through TEFAP and other USDA programs. Expand access to SNAP, which is one of the most efficient programs at reducing food insecurity. Leverage high-capacity partners like the nation's food banks to move food safely, efficiently and equitably to the people and communities who need it.

I want to again thank Senator Boozman, Senator Stabenow, and Agriculture Committee members for inviting me to testify. The Arkansas Food Bank celebrates the committee's interest in ensuring all our neighbors have the food they need. I look forward to working with you on that important goal and to answering your questions.

Sincerely,



Rhonda Sanders, CEO

Arkansas Foodbank