
Feeding Our Neighbors

Communities turn to government and private resources—and considerable compassion—to provide hunger relief to those in need.

BY SUSAN DAVIS GRYDER

Hunger in America is a staggering problem.

Despite the aisles and aisles of food products available in most supermarkets and various symbols of American wealth and comfort conveyed through relentless television and print advertising, there are families in virtually *every* community in this country that are struggling to make ends meet. And their cupboards are bare.

Look closely and you will find food-insecure households in every setting from coast to coast, in rural farms and suburban neighborhoods and the inner city. Hungry Americans defy stereotypes: You will find them among all races and ages, from very young to very old. While many are un- or underemployed, others have jobs, but carry the burden of caring for immediate and extended family members. Advocacy organizations estimate that one in six Americans will be hungry today, as you read this article, including almost 20 million children. In fact, according to Feeding America, in more than 1,000 U.S. counties, upward of 25% of kids go to bed hungry at night.

Of course, as a school nutrition professional, you have seen—and served—some of the faces of hunger in your community. The federal school meal programs—including breakfast, lunch and snack—that you offer make a big difference in providing area children with essential nutrition support, mostly when school is in session. But what about when schools are closed? And what about other family members who are going without?

There is an array of federal programs that can help fill the gap, as well as relief programs coordinated and funded by nonprofit organizations, including places of worship. Take a little time to familiarize yourself with the following overview of such resources, so that you can help to be an information source to children, parents, coworkers and others who may not know where to turn.





SNAPSHOT

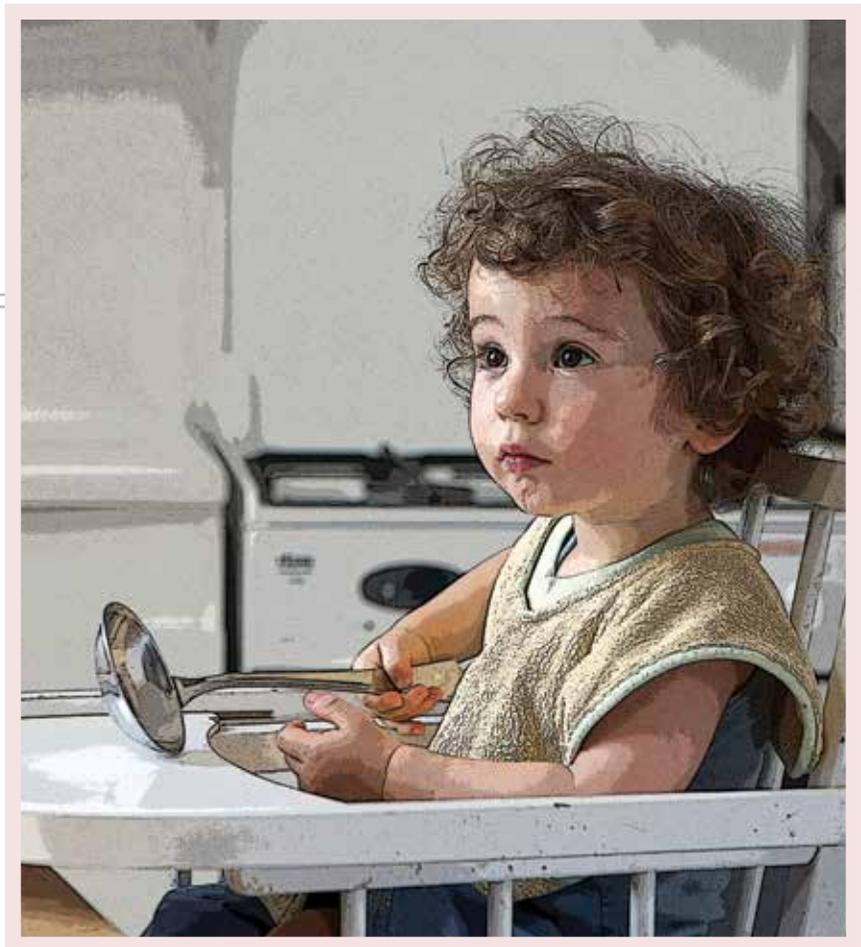
- Most people living with food insecurity must turn to a mix of public and private food supports.
- Some food assistance programs are targeted to assist niche populations, such as children, the elderly and the homeless.
- Education—including nutrition and life skills—is an important component of many programs.

SNAP at Your Service

Perhaps the most well-recognized federal program that assists low-income people who are struggling to get enough food on the table is the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**, known for decades as the Food Stamp program. As with school meal programs, SNAP is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), with individual benefits distributed through the states. SNAP provides financial assistance for purchasing most prepackaged edible foods, regardless of nutritional value.

The food stamp program started in 1932 during the Great Depression. Needy Americans received blue-and-orange slips of paper that could be redeemed for food. As with the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), established more than a decade later, the food stamp program also provided support for American agriculture during a time of great price instability. The program relied on coupons (“stamps”) bound into booklets of various denominations that corresponded 1:1 with U.S. currency.

By the late Nineties, the program had been retooled to provide participants with a more private way to access benefits, notably through electronic debit cards that are programmed to allow the purchase of authorized food items. Most of the time, beneficiaries use their SNAP cards to buy regular grocery items to prepare at home. Some users who aren't able to prepare their own meals, such as people who are homeless or disabled, can use the cards to buy prepared meals at low-cost restaurants. With the complete phase-out of the coupons, the program was rechristened SNAP in 2008.



Despite longstanding stereotypes about those who take advantage of government largess, the vast majority of SNAP beneficiaries are those who are truly in need. More than 80% of SNAP benefits go to households that include a child, a senior citizen or a disabled person; indeed, nearly half of SNAP beneficiaries are children. Applicants are eligible if their gross household income is no more than 130% of the federal poverty guideline: \$24,089 for a family of three in 2012. In addition, despite claims that recipients rely on SNAP for long-term support, statistics show that most SNAP participants use program benefits for just 8 to 10 months—usually sufficient time for a family to get back on its feet and find renewed sources of income. Indeed, SNAP has been a critical resource to respond to sweeping crises, such as the recent U.S. recession, as well as emergency situations, such as in the wake of hurricanes, floods and other disasters.

In addition to meeting income requirements, SNAP applicants must

demonstrate that they don't have certain assets, such as bank accounts in excess of \$2,000. There are other standards that limit an applicant's access to SNAP: for example, if an individual is deemed able to work, eligibility for benefits may be reduced. SNAP benefits also are restricted to those with U.S. citizenship or documented immigrants who have completed a five-year waiting period, unless under age 18.

Even those who meet all the qualifications are unlikely to find SNAP sufficient to meet their food and nutrition needs. Benefits work out to an estimated \$1.50 per person per meal, and they don't cover a participant's needs for an entire month. This is why many users also rely on school meals, other federal programs and community resources like food banks.

Do you or someone you know need to apply for SNAP benefits? Check the phone book or Internet for local offices, state hotline numbers and online applications to learn how to proceed.

More Acronyms to the Rescue

In low-income families, children and their mothers—particularly pregnant and nursing moms—can be at special risk for the debilitating and long-lasting effects of hunger and malnutrition. Lack of nutritious food creates health and learning problems for babies, toddlers and preschool children that can last for years. *The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)* was established to provide a nutrition safety net specifically for this at-risk group. WIC is administered by USDA, through its Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) division, with individual services provided at the state and local levels.

WIC provides monthly benefits to nine million program participants every month, enabling them to buy healthy foods at local grocery stores. WIC serves low-income women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or postpartum, as well as their infants and children up to age 5. Each beneficiary must meet income guidelines and be certified as “nutritionally at risk” by a health professional, such as a doctor, nurse or nutritionist.

Approved WIC beneficiaries receive checks or vouchers that allow them to purchase nutritious, kid-friendly foods; with guidance from FNS staff, state agencies determine exactly what foods are allowed, and cultural preferences prevalent in the area are often taken into account, so that participants can purchase such items as tortillas, brown rice or specific kinds of produce. WIC participants also receive nutrition education and counseling, provided at county health departments, hospitals, mobile clinics, community centers, public housing sites and more.



Take a look at some quick WIC facts:

- ✿ About half of WIC’s nine million participants are children between the ages of 1 and 5; another 25% are infants—in fact, WIC supports 53% of all infants born in the United States!

- ✿ The majority of WIC recipients are white.

- ✿ WIC recipients live in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and the five territories; they use their benefits at 47,000 authorized retail locations.

- ✿ All but 10% of the women enrolled in the program are over 18, and more than half are working or have worked in the past year. Still, nearly two-thirds have incomes below the poverty line.

Another federal service, *The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)*, began in 1981 as part of a set of emergency measures to get more food assistance to people in need. Like the NSLP, TEFAP is administered by USDA/FNS and provides a market for U.S. agriculture, assisting with market stabilization while supporting low-income Americans.

Under TEFAP, states receive allotments of USDA Foods according to their percentage of low-income and unemployed residents. Each state handles distribution of its TEFAP allotment differently, with most directing the commodities received to food banks, which, in turn, distribute it to food pantries, soup kitchens or other meal preparation organizations.

Banking on Community Support

Federal programs can only close part of the hunger gap, in part because benefits only stretch so far and, in general, don't keep up with fluctuating food prices. In addition, some of those who need services don't take advantage of federal assistance, either from ignorance, lack of awareness, pride, fear of the government, language barriers or mental incapacity.

In many municipalities, various community organizations work to provide hunger relief services, from formal meal preparation and delivery to less-formal food distribution, but among the most common of such programs are **food banks** and **food pantries**. These two terms are often used synonymously, but although they share similar missions, food banks and food pantries are not, in strict definition, the same thing.

A **food bank** is a central repository that stores very large amounts of food. It operates like a warehouse or wholesaler, providing food to distribution sites like food pantries and soup kitchens. Centralized food banks are actually a relatively new idea: Established in 1967, St. Mary's Food Bank in Phoenix, Ariz., claims to be the world's first food bank.

One of the largest food banks in the country and a great example of the extensive reach a food bank can achieve is the Capital Area Food Bank in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1980, on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, partly in response to cutbacks in the food stamp program, the Capital Area Food Bank is going strong, with some impressive statistics. It currently distributes 30 million pounds of food each year, serving some 478,000 residents of the Washington metropolitan area. It operates a main warehouse, covering 48,000 square feet, along with a smaller, supplemental warehouse in the Virginia suburbs.

The Capital Area Food Bank supports

700 partner agencies that provide food assistance directly to clients. In addition, the organization conducts 70 fresh produce drops each month to 40 neighborhood sites located in "food deserts"—areas without grocery stores or supermarkets, leaving residents with few nutritious options.

Like most food banks, the Capital Area Food Bank gets its supplies from diverse sources. In addition to local food drives, fundraising efforts and grant monies, the organization receives large amounts of food from different players in the food business. This might include excess inventory from distributors, surplus from manufacturer test marketing and items that are short-code dated or minimally out of spec. Its work is supported by a significant corps of D.C.-area volunteers.

Food pantries tend to be the primary beneficiaries of food bank resources. If a food bank operates as something of a wholesaler, a food pantry is more like a retail site, directly serving clients, typically on a planned periodic basis. Most stock only shelf-stable foods, although depending on available storage and donations, perishable items might be available, as well. Some food pantries provide clients with a predetermined mix of regularly stocked items and their choice of special donations. Others allow clients to "shop" for themselves, selecting needed and desired items. According to a 2010 study from Hunger in America, food pantries can be a regular source of food relied upon by some low-income individuals and families.

The term "**soup kitchen**" might conjure up vintage images of Depression-era, down-on-their-luck men in porkpie hats, standing in long lines. But structured charitable meal services have been around in this country a lot longer. Soup



kitchens aren't homeless shelters, but they often serve the same population. Today, they are typically referred to as meal sites or meal programs; they might be operated, with considerable help from volunteers, through support of a food bank, in conjunction with a food pantry or through a religious or other private organization.

They might offer meals a few times a week or on a daily basis. Programs range from a local church's opening the doors to its parish hall to host a hot breakfast program for the homeless three times a week, to an organized meal delivery service to shut-ins (more on that on the next page), to mobile meal distribution sites around town.

Backpack Programs Send Hunger Relief Home

Millions of kids get key nutritional support from free and reduced-price school meal programs that serve breakfast, lunch and even dinner during the school year, and from summer feeding programs during the long break. But what about weekends, holidays and shorter breaks?

In many school districts, teachers, administrators and school nutrition professionals have worked together with hunger-relief organizations to provide kids with groceries or snacks to take home when school is closed. These are often packed in nondescript book bags to help maintain the child's anonymity.

The first **backpack program** in the nation was said to have been established in 1995 in Little Rock, Ark., after a school

nurse raised the alarm that some students were coming to school too hungry to learn. Today, the hunger-relief organization Feeding America estimates that its local programs *alone* distribute end-of-the-week backpacks to nearly 230,000 children every year.

Backpack programs are operated all over the country, in both rural and urban environments, usually as part of initiatives launched by schools, food banks, religious institutions and other non-profits. Organizers work to obtain a regular source of donated food or lower-priced items from retailers, distributors and manufacturers and recruit volunteers to sort, pack and distribute these discreet gestures of love and support for our neediest children.



Direct Delivery

Some people who are disabled, ill or elderly may need hunger relief services but aren't able to visit local food pantries or prepare meals at home. **Meal delivery programs**, which supply and distribute prepared meals at low or no cost, help address this need, allowing some people to delay or avoid residential assisted living care (aka nursing homes). In fact, studies show that as many as 30% of residents of nursing homes today have low-care needs that, with the right kind of community support, might allow them to stay in their homes. And a recent study from researchers at Brown University shows that every \$25 per year per older adult spent on home-delivered meals reduces the percentage of low-care nursing home residents by one percentage point. Plus, in addition to food, meal delivery programs offer homebound clients daily human contact and the continuity of a pleasant routine.

The most well known of these programs is Meals On Wheels, the oldest national food delivery program, which serves seniors over age 60 and provides over one million meals each day across the nation. Meals on Wheels delivers hot meals five days a week, dropping off cold items like sandwiches to be kept for non-delivery days. A voluntary donation of \$4/meal is requested for those who *can* afford it, but the program does not turn away those who can't pay.

The organization also works to raise awareness about the importance of feeding our senior population. Its staffers conduct research and help officials identify emerging trends in food insufficiency for elderly Americans. As just one example, Meals on Wheels helped develop a blueprint for delivering services to seniors in rural areas, where there are unique challenges related to

transportation of meals, volunteers to prepare them and costs.

Some communities rely on similar services as a critical stopgap in addressing hunger and nutrition. For example, Food and Friends is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit whose clients include people living with HIV/AIDS, cancer and other debilitating illnesses that make it challenging to shop and prepare food at home. Proper nutrition is often critical to help clients manage their medical conditions. Food and Friends delivers meals and groceries free of charge to some 3,000 people. Rather than using income status to determine client eligibility, the organization evaluates health status, need for additional nutrition and inability to prepare meals. Caretakers, children and dependents are served, as well. Individual and corporate donations, with limited public funds, keep the operation going.

Reaching & Teaching



While most community nutrition programs help to provide food security on a short-term basis, others have taken on an additional mission: Provide clients with the tools and training for a brighter, sustainable future. One such program, Milwaukee's Hunger Task Force, operates a 150-acre farm and fish hatchery outside the city. In addition to providing more than 300,000 pounds of fresh food every year to the city's hungry residents, the farm offers a work program, which offers under-skilled trainees the chance to learn farming, warehouse work, construction, landscaping, equipment repair and more. Program "graduates" can take those skills into the wider workplace and build a future that will allow them to rely less or not at all on food supports.

Another successful program that marries support for the hungry with job training is DC Central Kitchen in the nation's capital. With its motto, "We Use Food to Strengthen Communities," DC Central Kitchen works toward the twin goals of getting food to those in need while

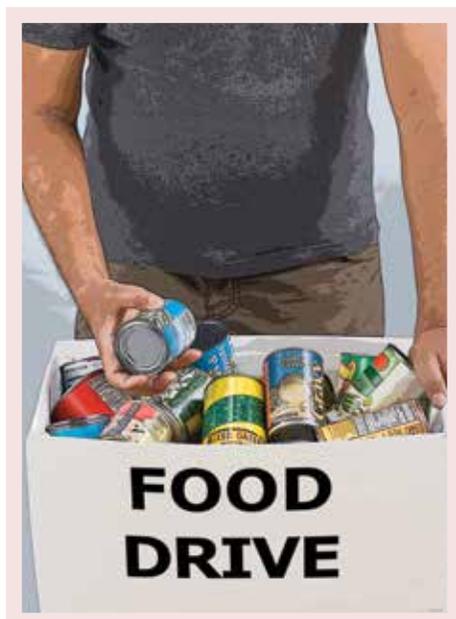
providing job training to raise people out of poverty. The organization prepares some 5,000 low- or no-cost meals every day that are distributed to homeless shelters, transitional housing sites and other nonprofit organizations, as well as directly to the homeless in D.C. Meals are prepared by participants in the organization's culinary job training program, offered to those who are unemployed, underemployed previously incarcerated or homeless.

Each "class" of 25 students attends culinary classes for 14 weeks; they also participate in self-empowerment, life skills and job readiness training. At "graduation," students earn their ServSafe Food Protection Manager's Certification, and they are ready to seek work in the foodservice business.

To fund its work, DC Central Kitchen has a thriving catering business, is contracted to provide meals to some area schools and delivers fresh produce and healthy snacks to an estimated 30 corner stores in the city's food deserts. These

channels provide the organization with about 50% of the income it needs to operate. The rest comes from fundraising efforts and grants. In addition, DC Central Kitchen is committed to reducing food waste, and takes leftover/donated food from restaurants, retailers and other sources—close to a million pounds of food each year—using these contributions in its meal preparation. It also negotiates deals to purchase misshapen or blemished produce from local farmers.

DC Central Kitchen may be one of the oldest programs combining hunger relief with job skills training, but there are similar programs all across the country today. In Raleigh, N.C., for example, the Culinary Job Training Program of the Inter-Faith Food Shuttle turns out regular classes of graduates, training formerly unemployed and underemployed people who have faced severe life crises for foodservice jobs. And in 2000, SNA and USDA teamed up to promote a similar model for school nutrition operations with the Community Kitchens initiative.



Neighbors Helping Neighbors

A meal delivery route served by friendly volunteer faces. A foodservice kitchen staffed by hopeful trainees. Giant warehouses of donated food. A small hot lunch program that serves only a few dozen people. All of these disparate services have one thing in common: people in need, finding help from local sources of support so they can eat nutritious meals, enjoy some company and even prepare themselves for a brighter personal future. Whether such food security programs receive federal funding or operate solely on the good grace of support from local businesses and individuals, they provide the personal touch in that most personal of needs: a healthy and satisfying, nutritious meal. **SN**

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