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SPECIAL REPORT: AMERICA'S FOOD
BANKS SAY CHARITY WON'T END
HUNGER

BY JESSICA POWERS
FOR WHYHUNGER
[@WhyHunger](#), [@foodandfury](#)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The second Closing the Hunger Gap (CTHG) conference in Portland, Oregon in September 2015 revealed considerable shifts in the way that emergency food providers discuss and are evolving their work. Since the origins of food banks in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the primary focus has been the charitable distribution of donated food to people in need. As service providers started observing a chronic need for food assistance and distributing more fresh produce over the past twenty years, broader conversations about health and access followed. Today, emergency food providers continue to distribute food but many acknowledge that equity and justice are critical to end hunger. This report describes those shifts in thinking in order to engage providers who have not yet expanded their mission to include strategies to transform the systems and policies that perpetuate hunger as well as organizing those using their services to inform and lead this change. This shift also includes engaging with donors, volunteers and the public to support long-term solutions that would end the need for food banks, while continuing with the short-term immediate work of food distribution.

Some food banks and food pantries acknowledge the need to have critical conversations about the limitations of charity. They see the need to devote resources to social justice work-- including racial and economic justice -- in order to grow the movement to end hunger and to create lasting change. Improving nutrition and quality of food, inclusive decision making that involves program participants and eradicates social stigma, purchasing from local farmers and producers, and spending money in accordance with values of social change are all necessary steps to end hunger.

CLOSING THE HUNGER GAP: CULTIVATING FOOD JUSTICE

The [Oregon Food Bank](#) hosted the [Closing the Hunger Gap: Cultivating Food Justice Conference](#) with the [Leadership Team](#) from September 13-16th, 2015 in Portland, Oregon. The event brought together 501 attendees from 41 US states and 3 Canadian provinces to discuss hunger relief and food justice. Participants represented food banks and emergency food programs (47%), food justice or anti-hunger nonprofits (14%), human services organizations (7%), academic or research institutions (7%), farms or gardens (5%), public health (4%), policy (4%), government (3%), and others. The first Closing the Hunger Gap conference was hosted by the [Food Bank of Southern Arizona](#) in Tucson in [2013](#).

HISTORY AND CHALLENGES OF THE FOOD BANK MODEL

By conservative estimates, there are over [60,500](#) emergency food providers-- food banks, food pantries, food access providers-- in the US, with some variation of an organizational mission to end hunger in their communities. Government nutrition assistance helps [45.5 million](#) people in the US, yet at least [17.4%](#) of households (approximately 69 million people) are food insecure, and [four out of five](#) people experience poverty at some point in their lifetime. By all accounts, what was initially seen as a food “emergency” in the 1970s is now a chronic problem of hunger. The ensuing decades brought an [erosion of the social safety net](#), an increase in [precarious employment](#), [wages that don't keep pace with inflation](#), a cynical end to bipartisan support for [effective government nutrition supports](#), and a dramatic rise in [economic inequality](#). In a worrisome trend, the moral responsibility to care for the most vulnerable among us is being

transferred from government to private charity. In effect, charitable food serves as a secondary distribution system or “de facto grocery store” in which poor people exchange their time waiting on line for food. Emergency food providers are more professionalized, with sophisticated warehousing and supply chain management, unwavering community support, vast numbers of volunteers, and, nobly, they distribute more and more food each year. But this is also misleading, because the vast majority of support for food insecure people still comes from government, not private charity.



Image: Bread for the World

However, by defining the problem as “hunger” rather than poverty and economic inequality, the solution is largely limited to food distribution. Recent interest from the public health community and nutrition advocates, pressure from donors, involvement of community food systems and “good food” advocates, innovation at emergency food organizations and a cultural change to discuss racial and economic justice more broadly has influenced food banks to add programs that focus on nutrition, advocacy and community organizing. Yet many staff, boards, donors, and Feeding America-- the national network of food banks-- continue to measure “success” by the number of pounds of food distributed or food waste diverted from landfills. This seems counter-intuitive, because success at ending hunger would mean fewer people in need of food in the first place. **Charity alone is not working.**

What do we mean by charity? Grounded in religious and ethical traditions of helping the most vulnerable among us, charity tends to provide direct services (food, clothing, shelter) to those in immediate need. The provider has the agency and the receiver is passive. Charity addresses the symptoms of a problem rather than its root causes. In the words of author Jan Poppendieck, it releases a “moral safety valve,” enabling the provider to feel as if she or he did a good deed without having to challenge the system that produced inequities in the first place. Community food security is defined “as a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance, social justice, and democratic decision-making.” Social justice addresses the distribution of wealth, opportunities, privileges and power within a society.



Image: hungerintohealth.com

CHANGE IS UNDERWAY

Food banks and food pantries often conjure images of drab and under resourced places with dusty, expired cans of food, long lines and well-meaning but fretful volunteers. While there's a grain of truth to this perception, it doesn't recognize that the industry is changing rapidly, with the average food bank distributing perishable food as roughly one quarter to one half of its inventory. A sea change is underway, with emergency food providers redefining their role in the community as healthcare intervention sites, community food centres, organizers of program participants, trainers of community health and nutrition advocates, facilitators of community food systems work, drivers of community economic development, growers of food on urban rooftops, small livestock producers, and teachers of canning and preservation techniques.

Many of the staff at food access organizations wrestle internally with measurements of success, the limited scope of their organization's mission, lack of organizational investment in addressing the root causes of hunger and poverty and frustration at not solving the problem that they set out to solve. It's an open secret. There is tremendous opportunity to transform emergency food and to engage communities in creating lasting change in partnership with the most vulnerable people in their communities. But the mainstream anti-hunger conferences and events focus on "business as usual." In response, in 2013 the Food Bank of Southern Arizona initiated a collaboratively organized conference to bring together food banks and ally organizations interested in asking challenging questions about their work, to learn from each other, and to think big about systems change. These questions don't have easy answers, but it points to another tremendous shift underway in service delivery: **a call for a transformation from charity to justice.**

MAKING SPACE FOR REFLECTION

Progressive food bankers and their colleagues have quietly grappled with the limitations and effectiveness of food banking for years. While these institutions help their neighbors obtain needed food supplies and have, over the years, created stronger programming to address nutrition and food quality, the need for assistance continues to grow. It is readily acknowledged that "you can't food bank your way out of hunger." The majority (95%) of nutrition assistance for low income people comes from a patchwork of government programs that help, but do not fully address, the existing need. Meanwhile, government nutrition programs that long received bipartisan support are increasingly under attack. After years of talking in the hallways and at

breaks during the big, national anti-hunger conferences, the staff of the Food Bank of Southern Arizona obtained organizational support to host a conference about this groundswell of interest in community food systems and social justice. The Tucson staff engaged a team of allies from around the country for input, trained staff in facilitation and created space for reflection, sharing successes as well as disappointments, and inquiry about the possibilities for food banking in the future. [The Oregon conference](#), held two years later, continued in this spirit. Attendees reported¹ feeling as if they were “not alone” after connecting with peers and allies who were asking similar critical questions.

Most of the mainstream anti-hunger conferences do not have an open call for workshop proposals, literally closing them off to new ideas, ally organizations and change agents. They are often underwritten by [donors who have a negative impact](#) on the issues of charitable food and community food security, which advocates ultimately seek to change. Emergency food providers often face resistance to change from board members, organizational leadership, peers, volunteers and donors who are invested in a charity model that is professionalized and yet potentially [disempowering](#) or lacking in its ability to impact poverty and economic inequality. Too often, the funding environment creates competition for scarce resources rather than collaboration and the ability to learn from failures as well as successes. Drawing from social justice organizing values such as transparency, equity, shared leadership, democratic processes and [popular education](#) rather than expertise, the organizers of the second Closing the Hunger Gap conference created an important space for open discussion.

TOWARD A SHARED POLITICAL ANALYSIS

In a day and a half event leading up to the conference, 62 people participated in a conversation on “Working Together to Transform Emergency Food” facilitated by [WhyHunger](#) staff. Attendees created a [historical timeline](#) discussing events that impacted hunger, poverty, and food systems in the US. From there, they considered the “real” solutions and “false” solutions to ending hunger. While participants at the 2013 conference largely spoke of incremental change through improved programmatic work (on health and nutrition, community economic development, relationships with local farmers, community organizers and social justice advocates), this group largely shared a political analysis: neoliberal capitalism is “working the way it’s supposed to” and creating an underclass; racism and structural oppression are at the root of hunger and poverty; there needs to be a radical transformation of corporate control, wealth disparity, and an increase in real democracy if we are going to see an end to hunger and poverty. Participants called for shared resources and communications tools to organize together.

At the opening plenary of the conference, Joann Lo of the [Food Chain Workers Alliance](#) shared the history and impact story of the Black Panther Party’s Survival Programs-- using food as a community organizing tool while satisfying a basic need-- which in turn influenced the creation of food banks and the national School Breakfast Program. Over the next two days, a packed audience attended a workshop and open session on Race and Privilege. Real life scenarios from food banks and food pantries were shared and participants were asked to discuss whether there

¹ In the “2015 Conference Evaluation” document by Emily Becker and Linda Landcaster.

was an issue of race and/or privilege in the scenario and whether it was personal or institutional.² By day two, participants wrote the following collaboratively created statement:

Racial injustice and privilege are at the root of economic injustice. Economic injustice is the root cause of hunger. The only way to end hunger is to end racial injustice.

The statement went on to outline actions that food banks should commit to: assessment of anti-racist practices within their organization; relationship building with groups led by people of color; hiring and retention practices; training; and creating internal policies to support anti-racism work. In the conference evaluation, 28% of respondents said that race, privilege, and inequity should be the focus of the 2017 conference (all other potential themes received no more than 5% of total respondents in support.)

This notable shift in political framing is attributed by some to a generational divide or to people who are not in positions of power at their organizations. Others believe it may be caused by a reflection on four decades of food banking, widening economic inequality, and cultural shifts represented by [Occupy Wall Street](#), [Black Lives Matter](#), [Fight for 15](#), a [democratic socialist](#) presidential candidate, and a recognition of the [forgotten histories](#) of social and economic justice organizing. Regardless of the source, a more politically radical analysis was observed in the pre-conference event, workshops and plenary sessions.

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US!³

Another shortcoming of the charity model is that solutions are largely determined by people who are not directly impacted by the issues they are trying to solve. For example, most mainstream anti-hunger organizations focus their advocacy on protecting the government nutrition programs, while [people with lived experiences of hunger and poverty](#) focus on job creation; living wages; affordable housing, healthcare, childcare, and transportation; community input; and a broader vision for the social safety net. Closing the Hunger Gap included plenary speakers who had experiences organizing in retail or foodservice work or through their food access organization. Throughout the conference, attendees discussed the critical need to be more inclusive, having participants of their programs sit on boards, [participate in decision making](#), set priorities for action and speak to elected officials. Attendees also flagged the need for their own organizations to be more flat: decision making must be shared by all staff, not just

² For example: 1) A food pantry volunteer refers to certain clients as “coming from the other side of the tracks.” 2) At a food bank, the majority of program and administrative staff are white and the majority of operations staff are people of color.

³ Or, “nothing for us without us”, a statement attributed to Central European political traditions. It was then used in English by the disability rights movement, and has since been embraced more broadly within identity politics and populist movements.

leadership. Organizational development theorists teach us that leaders can drive change or that resistance to change can be the result of entrenched leadership. Nearly 30% of veteran food bank leaders retired or are in the process of retiring over the last three years. New leaders often bring knowledge from community food systems, urban agriculture, community economic development and organizing.

Food banks, food pantries, and charitable food organizations can view themselves as facilitators of community-driven solutions, rather than as experts that have the answers to community problems.

As Emma Garcia of [Access of West Michigan](#) explained: “Food banks, food pantries, and charitable food organizations can view themselves as facilitators of community-driven solutions, rather than as experts that have the answers to community problems. Charitable food organizations can seek to diffuse power structures and dismantle paternalism by inviting community members to create and sustain solutions. Instead of performing needs assessments, charitable food must do [power analysis](#).” Even as food access organizations struggle with scarce resources, they must recognize the relative power and privilege that they do have: capacity to capture a large percentage of charitable dollars in a community or to obtain more food; legitimacy bestowed by elected officials and other philanthropists; size and influence as a professionalized and stable non-profit.

NEW MEASURES

Veteran Canadian organizer Mike Balkwill of [Put Food in the Budget](#) aptly describes organizing as: “change is slow, until it’s fast.” With demands from donors and the public for return on investment, it is no surprise that food banks rely on quantifiable measures such as pounds of food or number of people served (with the assumption that the numbers should go up over time) to convey their impact. It is certainly more difficult to articulate investment in programs that work to create long term change: these efforts might be more collaborative, they involve processes and significant time commitments, and the effects might not be visible for many years. Healthy, nutrient dense foods may not weigh as much as empty calories in processed foods. Many participants stated a need for new methods of evaluation and measurement to support their work. While examples for [measuring community food systems](#) exist, there lacks consensus on a viable alternative method. Others suggest moving to [theory of change](#) models or using [Bennett’s Hierarchy](#) to determine impact/outcome measurement.

Similarly, measurements of poverty and “need” are [outdated and flawed](#). And addressing hunger in isolation from other poverty and inequity issues doesn’t reflect the complex reality of people’s lives or the [social determinants of health](#).

More broadly, participants expressed a need for a shared strategy for communications and messaging to shift the dominant public narrative about charitable food distribution and hunger. Stakeholders (donors, leadership, the public), they argued, need to undergo a shift in their analysis of hunger relief and it is food access organizations that need to drive this change. This includes a shared commitment to moving away from [emotional appeals](#) that disempower people, that suggest value judgements about the deserving and undeserving poor, and that are

racially coded. People noted that being “anti” something doesn’t draw people in: we need to frame racial and economic justice as necessary and moral.

REAL SOLUTIONS

In a stirring plenary at the conference, Nick Saul of [Community Food Centres Canada](#) urged providers to “put a box around the food bank.”⁴ That is, rather than anxiously responding to ever growing need by dedicating more and more resources to obtaining and distributing food, invest resources in long term/root cause/systems change work. While most food banks acknowledge the limitations of food distribution (so pervasive that it is commonly referred to as a verb, “food banking”), the budgets of those organizations that are allocated for organizing, advocacy and policy work are relatively small. Often, funds for this type of work are further obfuscated as “hunger awareness,” little more than marketing in service of sustaining the organization.

Besides investment, food banks can support the work of organizers in their own communities. Racial justice, economic justice, support for workers across the food chain (from farmers to processors to foodservice), and real democracy (ending voter restrictions, campaign finance reform, changes to the tax code) were all lifted up as long term solutions for which food banks can advocate.

The Feeding America network sourced [3.7 billion meals](#) in 2015 through a combination of purchased food, fresh produce, federal commodities, and manufacturing and retail donations. This accounts for roughly [62 percent](#) of the food that agencies distribute. Charitable contributions to help address hunger in the US were valued at [\\$17.8 billion dollars](#) in 2010. The total cost burden for food insecurity in the US that year was [\\$167.5 billion dollars](#). This is a significant part of the food system that is too often ignored by community food security and “good food” advocates. Imagine the potential for investing in local food and farm economies through commodity and emergency food procurement that benefits local communities.⁵

Not everyone is willing to make changes to the status quo. This might require difficult conversations and ending relationships with specific board members, volunteers, donors and even [closing agencies along the way](#). It will take courage, but it may be necessary in order to fulfill a mission that calls for *ending* hunger.

Attendees reported real change personally and at their organizations as a result of participating in the Closing the Hunger Gap conferences. People changed jobs in order to do work that better reflected their priorities, organizations implemented

“This conference has been eye-opening, empowering, educational, and life-changing.”

changes to their missions and ways of doing business (including broader goals than food distribution, implementing community food principles across the organization and equity processes), and individuals reported feeling recharged and inspired after connecting with like-minded people. The conference evaluation included comments such as: “This conference has

⁴ Or, draw a line around the food bank.

⁵ Andy Fisher, *Hunger Inc.*, forthcoming.

been eye-opening, empowering, educational, and life-changing” and “I feel like I can never go to another conference again outside of Closing the Hunger Gap because I’ll just be thinking the whole time that we’re not talking about the right things. Thank you for that.”

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The following recommendations for how to move forward are based on the post-conference meeting, the conference evaluation, notes from workshop presentations, and feedback from conference attendees.

Continue to create space for critical conversations about food banking. *Closing The Hunger Gap is currently a bi-annual event. Participants want more frequent opportunities to engage with this emerging network through regional events and shared learning.*

Engage the public and funders in the need to transform emergency food to a movement for social justice. *Educating donors and changing the public conversation about hunger relief are priorities in order to advance systemic change.*

Make racial justice a top organizational priority. *Food banks must work to undo racism and privilege within their own organizations, in their community and in society at large in order to end hunger and poverty.*

Advocate alongside economic justice organizations for measures that will end income inequality. *Neoliberalism has failed the vast majority of people, who are working harder yet face more precariousness, fewer benefits and less success.*

Involve those using the food banking system to meet their food needs as leaders and decision makers in the organization’s strategic priorities. *People who are impacted by issues of hunger and poverty are “experts” on what is needed in their communities and must be included in decision-making.*

Become a learning organization. *Transformation is a learning process. Organizations must look internally to assess if their mission to end hunger is being addressed through current programming and be willing to engage with the community to adjust strategies and indicators of success.*

CONCLUSION

The second Closing the Hunger Gap conference did not resolve the issues with charitable food, nor did a refined consensus platform for how to move forward together emerge. However, it did reflect a changing landscape among food access providers who recognize the need to move away from charity and towards justice. According to veteran food banker Willy Elliot McCrea of the

Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County, some food bankers posit that about one third of food banks are engaged in transformative work, one third are thinking about it, and another third are maintaining the old guard. But thirty years ago, asking food banks to help people obtain government nutrition benefits or source healthy food was considered radical. Today, those actions are standard. Similarly, while community food security work and organizing for social justice might seem to some to be outside the mission of their organization, this too will change. The attendees of the Closing the Hunger Gap conference are leading the charge in their communities to shift from framing the solution as one of charity to one of justice.

Attendees repeatedly referred to the “movement” during the conference, whether the anti-hunger movement, the good food movement, the community food security movement or the movement for racial and economic justice. It remains to be seen if Closing the Hunger Gap will create a network to not just share information and inspiration, but to build collective power. That is the potential muscle of this emerging group, to shift the public narrative about charity and hunger relief as viable long-term solutions, to leverage the purchasing power of emergency food as a critical part of the food system, and to build on existing community relationships and advocate for systems change in alliance with other networks and movements to end the systems, policies and practices that perpetuate poverty and hunger. It's a bold and radical posture, but it's the only way to go beyond closing the hunger gap to end hunger once and for all.

ENDORSEMENTS



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Special thanks to the [Closing the Hunger Gap Leadership Team](#).

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