

**To Legislative Health and Human Services Committee  
August 15, 2019 – 1:30 PM – RE: Hunger in New Mexico**

1 in 4 children, more than 118,000 children experience hunger in New Mexico.

Kids who don't get enough to eat — especially during their first three years — begin life at a serious disadvantage. When they're hungry, children are more likely to be hospitalized and they face higher risks of health conditions like anemia and asthma. And as they grow up, kids struggling to get enough to eat are more likely to have problems in many social situations.

Children facing hunger may struggle in school — and beyond. They are more likely to:

- Repeat a grade in elementary school
- Experience developmental impairments in areas like language and motor skills
- Have more social and behavioral problems

Children facing hunger often grow up in a family where a parent or parents also face hunger. In New Mexico an additional 206,000 people – adults and seniors are hungry.

- 84% of households report buying the cheapest food — instead of healthy food — in order to provide enough to eat.

The rate of hunger among seniors aged 60 and older has increased by 45% since 2001, a lingering effect of the 2008-09 recession.

And hunger pains can be increasingly painful as we age:

- 63% of senior households served by America's food bank network are forced to choose between food and medical care.

While hunger is in and of itself a danger for the health of many older Americans, it can also directly threaten various other aspects of a senior's wellness.

Not getting the proper nutrition can lead to an array of health issues, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, an unhealthy weight, osteoporosis, heart disease, stroke and more. Malnutrition can even lead to certain eating disorders among seniors.

A food shortage can cause a senior to spiral into a state of depression, stress, mental fatigue, sleeplessness, isolation or anger that can potentially be dangerous.

There are many negative effects food insecurity has on the heart, both from a level of stress and other physiological aspects. A Feeding America study found that seniors who suffer



from food insecurity were 40 percent more likely to experience congestive heart failure. This is a direct result of the quality of food eaten among food-insecure seniors and how lacking the necessary nutrient—especially when older—can play a role in exacerbating dire health issues.

The overall quality of food—and how inconsistently it's eaten—plays a role in developing type 2 diabetes in seniors.

Not only does food insecurity increase the risk of diabetes, it's also difficult for a diabetic person to afford a diet that supports diabetes when they are food insecure. This risk may be partially attributable to increased difficulty following a diabetes-appropriate diet and increased emotional distress regarding capacity for successful diabetes self-management.

Seniors are already at an increased risk of falls, and a malnourished senior who is weakened or light-headed by a lack of nutrition may face an even greater risk.

A senior facing the threat of hunger may be forced to make some difficult decisions. Should they spend their limited amount of money to buy food or to buy prescription medication? Can they purchase groceries and still pay the heating bill?

Because of their limited income, millions of seniors are forced to make difficult choices. According to Feeding America's research,

- 60% of older adult households have to choose between paying for food or utilities;
- 49% must choose between groceries and housing

People who live in rural areas often face hunger at higher rates, in part because of the unique challenges living remotely presents. These challenges include:

- An increased likelihood of food deserts with the nearest grocery store, food pantry or food bank potentially hours away
- Job opportunities that are more concentrated in low-wage industries
- Higher rates of unemployment and underemployment.

This can make hunger in rural areas a unique challenge:

I am here today representing five New Mexico food banks that make up the New Mexico Association of Food Banks. The food banks include the Community Pantry in Gallup; the Food Bank of Eastern New Mexico in Clovis; the ECHO food bank in Farmington; the Roadrunner Food Bank in Albuquerque; and The Food Depot in Santa Fe. These food banks have a specific service area, which ensures coverage of all 33 New Mexico counties.

New Mexico food banks are privately funded. They may receive government funds for administering federally-funded programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program or TEFAP; or they have contracts with local governments to provide food assistance.



The primary objective of New Mexico food banks is to end hunger by acquiring and distributing food to people who are hungry through a combination of direct service programs and support of a network of nonprofit partners.

Our network of hunger relief services involves food distribution to over 500 nonprofit agencies including food pantries, meal programs, homeless shelters, youth programs, domestic violence shelters, and senior centers.

A partnership with the food banks enables each of these agencies to focus their resources on their primary mission rather than on the acquisition of food.

Food banks also provide help to people in need through direct service programs such as:

- Mobile Food Pantry, which allows the food banks to distribute food directly to those people in need in rural, remote areas
- The USDA's Summer Food Service Program for children
- The USDA's Afterschool Meal Program for children
- School-based food pantries
- Diaper Depot – removes barrier regarding childcare
- Food 4 Pets
- Disaster Relief

Last year, New Mexico's food banks and their network of partner agencies distributed 38 million pounds of food, providing 31 million meals for hungry New Mexicans.

New Mexico food banks are part of the nation's leading domestic hunger-relief organization, Feeding America. Each year, the Feeding America network helps provide food to more than 46 million people facing hunger in the United States, including 12 million children and 7 million seniors.

Other sources of food for the food banks include:

- NM food banks work together on a Produce Initiative to acquire fresh produce from sources both in New Mexico and from neighboring states – with funds provided by the State of New Mexico
- Food banks acquire food and related donations from product donors within their service area including grocery stores, bakeries, restaurants, farms, and manufacturers and distributors. Much of this food is pulled off the shelves due to "sell by" dates or later in life product, and would go into landfills if not for the food banks.
- Community Food Drives – The Letter Carriers "Stamp Out" Hunger Food Drive is an example.



- Because the quantity and nature of donations fluctuate, food banks also utilize funds to purchase foods in bulk when economic opportunities arise.

New Mexico food banks also partner with the New Mexico Human Services Department to distribute commodity foods provided by the United States Department of Agriculture. The partnerships, collaborations and the help of thousands of volunteers, food donors and financial contributors make all of this work possible.

However, the food banks are challenged in accessing enough food for the number of people seeking help. New Mexico does not have large food companies or other food sources many food banks across the country utilize. We continue to identify potential sources and request to work with the legislature to eliminate any barriers to utilizing these sources:

- Produce left in the fields because it is not economically feasible for the farmers to pick it – Biggest challenge is labor
- Food leftover from school lunches – eliminate any State barriers to allowing cafeteria workers to package the food, freeze it and send home with hungry children
- Federal Food Programs – eliminate any additional regulations or requirements imposed by the State beyond what the USDA requires
- Do not reinstate the Food Tax

We thank the State of New Mexico and New Mexico legislators for providing such strong support of our hunger-relief efforts. We look forward to working with you and other NM legislators during these next sessions to develop additional help for hungry New Mexicans.

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