

Empty Plates in the Great Land

Alaska Leaves Millions in Federal Nutrition Dollars Unclaimed

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Executive Summary

Hunger is a serious and growing problem in Alaska. In 2005, 12.2 percent of Alaskan households were hungry or on the edge of hunger, up from 8.7 percent in 1998. More than 83,000 Alaskans turned to the emergency food providers in Food Bank of Alaska's network for assistance in 2005. That same year, federally-funded nutrition programs—including the Food Stamp Program, school meal programs, out-of-school-time programs, and commodity programs—brought millions of dollars in food assistance to Alaska. However, all of these programs are underutilized in this state. While thousands of Alaskan children, families, and elders go hungry, Alaska is leaving millions more dollars in federal nutrition resources unclaimed.

The Food Stamp Program, the largest federal food resource, reaches only 59 percent of Alaskans who are eligible. Most eligible but non-participating people are unaware of their eligibility or deterred by the complex application process. Food Bank of Alaska estimates that \$29.5 million in additional food stamp benefits could be claimed by helping these Alaskans in need to access the program. These forgone dollars represent not only a lost nutritional benefit to Alaskan families; they also represent lost revenues for local grocers and retailers and lost federal money for Alaskan communities. Food stamp participation is especially low in Alaska's largest cities, Anchorage and Fairbanks.

School nutrition programs provide free and low-cost meals to children across the state. While most schools in Alaska offer lunch, only two-thirds of Alaska schools have a breakfast program. Alaska ranks 48th among the states in breakfast participation by income-eligible students and could pick up an additional \$1.9 million from the federal government by getting up to par with the high-participation states. During the 2005-06 school year, 146 schools with 10,154 low-income students did not offer breakfast. There is the greatest room for expansion in rural Alaska, Anchorage, and the Kenai Peninsula.

Alaska's uptake of the Summer Food Service Program lags even further behind. Only 6 percent of low-income children accessed summer meals during the summer of 2005, putting Alaska in 50th place among the states for participation. Many after-school programs, shelters, and child and adult care centers could be receiving reimbursements for meals served to low-income clients under the Child and Adult Care Food Program but have not connected with this resource. State officials believe that the Alaska Native and other ethnic minority populations are currently underserved by the WIC program, which provides a targeted set of foods and other services to pregnant women, new mothers, infants, and young children.

With a comparatively modest investment at the state level, Alaska has the potential to leverage millions of additional nutrition dollars from the federal government. By reducing hunger and food insecurity among Alaskans, such an investment will pay dividends in healthier citizens, higher student achievement, and a more productive workforce. Making full use of these programs will require a state commitment to fight hunger, by supporting the work of the Department of Health and Social Services and the Department of Education and Early Development. The state, however, cannot do this alone—local governments, nonprofits, schools, faith communities, tribes, and the business community are all critical partners.

This report suggests a number of specific ways in which these stakeholders can work together. Food stamp outreach to eligible but non-participating Alaskans is a top priority, especially in urban Alaska. Emergency food providers and grocers have key roles to play in outreach, and the state can encourage these efforts through training and by drawing down federal outreach monies. School districts, nonprofits, the state government, and businesses can work together to support all of Alaska's schools in serving breakfast. The out-of-school-time programs need more tribes, faith communities, and nonprofits to host meal sites. Finally, there is much collaborative work to be done to streamline program administration, simplify application processes, and build connections between the programs so that Alaskans in need are able to obtain assistance in the most efficient and dignified manner possible.

This report also highlights three case studies in effective implementation of the federal food programs in Alaska. These "success stories" include a food stamp outreach project in Anchorage, a dynamic summer food site in Yakutat, and a model school breakfast program in the Bering Strait School District.

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1. Introduction

Hunger is a real, pressing, and growing problem in Alaska. According to the most recent data available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 12.2 percent of households in Alaska suffer from *food insecurity*, meaning that “their access to enough food is limited by a lack of money and other resources.”¹ Food insecurity means families worrying about food, cutting back on their quantity or quality of food, and facing heartbreaking choices between food and other necessities such as transportation, clothing, medical care, and utilities. Moreover, 4.9 percent of Alaskan households suffer from *very low food security*—marked by multiple indications of hunger.²

Alaska’s rates of food insecurity and hunger have been getting worse in recent years. The food insecurity rate climbed from 8.7 percent of Alaskan households in 1998 to 12.2 percent of Alaskan households in 2005. During that same period, the national food insecurity rate remained virtually unchanged. Alaska’s rate of very low food security also increased, from 3.6 to 4.9 percent, while the national rate again remained flat.³ Alaska’s food insecurity rates grew during a decade of brisk economic growth and a slightly falling unemployment rate, indicating that the bounty of Alaska’s economy was not shared by all.⁴

When most people think about feeding hungry people, they probably imagine a food bank, food pantry or soup kitchen distributing boxes of food or meals. The emergency food system, as these programs are collectively known, is indeed an essential part of the solution to hunger in Alaska. Each year, Food Bank of Alaska (FBA), through a network four community food banks and hundreds of food pantries and soup kitchens, serves more than 83,000 different people in Alaska.⁵ In 2005, this network distributed 8.6 million pounds of food, valued at approximately \$12.9 million.

However, the emergency food system is neither the only nor the largest resource available to feed hungry Alaskans. A wide range of federally-funded, state-administered nutrition programs serve Alaskans in need every day. The Food Stamp Program and the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) enable low-income families to buy more food at the grocery store. The National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program provide reimbursements for nutritious meals served to children at risk of hunger. The Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program give monthly food boxes to low-income families and seniors. In Fiscal Year 2005 (FY05), these programs brought nearly \$135 million in federal nutrition assistance into Alaska—over ten times the value of the food that passed through the emergency food system.⁶

Despite the large amount of federal nutrition assistance coming into Alaska, many Alaskans remain hungry, and all of the federal programs remain underutilized in this state. This report examines the role of each of these programs in Alaska, the reasons for their underutilization, the additional federal resources available, and potential policy solutions to help make the programs work better and eliminate hunger in Alaska for good.

2. The Status of the Federal Nutrition Programs in Alaska

The Food Stamp Program

The Food Stamp Program is the first line of defense against hunger. As the broadest-based federal nutrition program, food stamps account for more than half of the federal nutrition dollars coming to Alaska each year. Food stamps provide hungry individuals and families with the purchasing power they need to put nutritious food on the table. Recipients get a benefit each month through the Alaska Quest card, which may be used like a debit card at grocery stores and may also be used to purchase subsistence hunting and fishing equipment in certain rural areas of Alaska. The average monthly benefit in Alaska in FY06 was \$125.37 per person.⁷ The federal government funds 100 percent of food stamp benefits and approximately half of the administrative costs of the program.

The eligibility rules for the Food Stamp Program are complex, but generally speaking people whose gross incomes fall below 130 percent of the poverty line (see Table 1), who are U.S. citizens or have been legal permanent residents for 5 years, and whose financial resources do not exceed a certain value, are eligible for the program.⁸ The Food Stamp Program targets Alaska's most vulnerable populations. The majority of food stamp households in Alaska—57.2 percent in 2005—are families with children. Households with elderly individuals make up 10.2 percent of recipient households, and households with disabled nonelderly individuals, 17.9 percent.⁹

Since the 1960s, when the current Food Stamp Program began as a pilot project, food stamps have been credited with virtually eradicating the most severe forms of hunger in the United States.¹⁰ The Food Stamp Program responds quickly to changes in economic conditions. The food stamp caseload typically grows in a time of recession and unemployment, and shrinks when economic conditions become more favorable. Food stamps also provide an economic boost to communities, since food stamp benefits mean higher revenues for local business, who in turn have more money to spend. Researchers have estimated that an additional \$1 in food stamp benefits generates approximately \$1.80 in economic activity.¹¹

Despite the proven nutritional and economic benefits of the Food Stamp Program, it remains an underutilized resource in Alaska. According to the most recent estimate available from USDA, 59 percent of Alaskans who are eligible for food stamps received benefits in FY04, putting Alaska in 28th place for participation among the 50 states and the District of Columbia.¹² Among the working poor, the participation rate was even lower, at 54 percent. Out of approximately 83,000 Alaskans eligible for food stamps, just over 49,000 actually received benefits.¹³ The program brought \$64.4 million in federal funds into Alaska during FY04,¹⁴ but Food Bank of Alaska estimates that \$29.5 million in additional federal funds were left

**Table 1:
The Poverty Line in Alaska, 2006-07**

People in household	Poverty defined as annual income below:
1	\$12,250
2	\$16,500
3	\$20,750
4	\$25,000
5	\$29,250
6	\$33,500
7	\$37,750
8	\$42,000

**Table 2:
Program Access Index for Selected Regions in Alaska, 2005**

	Eligible persons (est.)	Food stamp participants	Program Access Index
Anchorage Municipality	31,872	18,065	56.7%
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	10,526	6,375	60.6%
Fairbanks- North Star Borough	11,488	4,066	35.4%
Balance of State	40,159	28,844	71.8%
State Total	94,045	57,350	61.0%

on the table that year due to underutilization of food stamps.¹⁵ These forgone dollars represent not only a lost nutritional benefit to Alaskan families; they also represent lost revenues for local grocers and retailers and lost federal money for Alaskan communities.

Gaps in food stamp participation are larger in some regions of Alaska than in others. While the official USDA participation rate is at the state level, a supplementary USDA measure—the Program Access Index (PAI)—provides a basis for estimating the percentages of low-income people served within regions and localities.¹⁶ FBA calculated the PAI for 2005 for all of the regions of Alaska for which current Census data are available: Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Fairbanks North Star Borough, and the balance of the state.¹⁷ Data on food stamp enrollment were provided by the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Assistance.

The results (Table 2) indicate that food stamp participation in urban Alaska is lagging behind that of rural Alaska. Anchorage was somewhat below the statewide participation estimate at 56.7 percent, while Fairbanks had the state's lowest Program Access Index at 35.4 percent. The Mat-Su Borough was very close to the state average, and the less-populated parts of the state—including the Kenai Peninsula, Southeast Alaska, bush Alaska and other areas—had the highest Program Access Index.

There are several reasons why not all eligible persons are enrolled in the Food Stamp Program. The majority of people who are eligible but not enrolled in food stamps do not know that they are eligible for benefits. Among these people, over two-thirds would apply if they knew they were eligible.¹⁸ Other eligible non-participants are deterred by one or more aspects of the application process, such as invasive questions and verification procedures; making multiple trips to the welfare office; taking time away from work, childcare or eldercare responsibilities; or filling out too much paperwork. Other potential clients may be misinformed about the nature of the program—believing, for example, that someone else might be denied benefits if they enroll in the program. (This is not the case because the Food Stamp Program is an entitlement program, meaning that anyone meeting the eligibility criteria has a legal right to benefits.) Finally, a minority of eligible non-participants report that they do not need food stamps or do not want government assistance.¹⁹

The reasons for the discrepancy in food stamp participation between urban and rural Alaska are not fully known. One possible explanation is that a higher degree of informal outreach exists in small-town Alaska. In smaller communities, where food stamp casework is often conducted by a local fee agent who may know everyone in town, there could be greater opportunities for information about the benefits to disseminate. Another possible factor is the growing immigrant population in urban Alaska. The percentage of the Anchorage population born abroad reached 8.5 percent in 2004, up from 6 percent in 1990 and 3 percent in 1970.²⁰ Since immigrants are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to access food stamps, this growth in the foreign-born population could partially explain the lower participation rate.²¹

School Nutrition Programs

In the wake of World War II in 1946, the U.S. Congress passed the National School Lunch Act as “a measure of national security.”²² Having seen the detrimental impact of undernutrition on America's armed forces, Congress saw the need for a nationwide school lunch program to ensure a minimum level of nutrition for all of the nation's children. Recognizing that school lunch was both highly successful and not sufficient by itself to meet the needs of low-income children, Congress established the School Breakfast Program in 1966.

Over six decades after the National School Lunch Program was founded, we know that the benefits of school meals extend far beyond national security. School meals help ensure that children from low-income households are ready to learn, succeed in school and become healthy and productive members of the workforce. A mountain of scientific research has linked childhood hunger with adverse physical, emotional, academic, and behavioral consequences, some of which may last a lifetime. Children who do not get enough to eat are more likely to experience colds, ear infections, anemia, overall poor health, anxiety, irritability, aggressive and destructive behaviors, withdrawn and distressed behaviors, and depression. Hungry children have lower test scores, learn less during the school year and

Success Story: *Universal Free Breakfast in the Bering Strait School District*

Serving school breakfast can be a difficult proposition in rural Alaska. High food prices and other costs, limited school facilities, small student populations, and long air distances between schools are all major challenges. However, thanks to a dynamic food service director and broad support from school officials, the Bering Strait School District—which includes some of the most remote villages in Alaska—offers free breakfast to all of its students and has achieved full participation in the School Breakfast Program among its schools.

Judie Kotongan, Food Service Manager, credits this success to “good support from the school board, superintendent and business manager.” These school officials recognize the difficult economics of the region, Kotongan said. “It would be very difficult in some of our villages for families to pay for the meals, even when they are working.” The local school principals are also key allies, and some have even adjusted school opening and closing times to enable students to start their day with a healthy breakfast.

While 80 percent of children in the region qualify for free or reduced-price meals, the federal reimbursements and commodities do not cover the high costs of running the program, so the school district provides a subsidy. The food service earns additional revenue with a side business in catering and by charging adults who come in to the schools for meals. “A lot of the elders will come in,” Kotongan said. “We don’t promote it, but we will feed them. We provide the only hot meal in town in a lot of places.”

Kotongan also deserves a large helping of credit for the program’s success. In 1997, she secured a \$25,000 grant from Share Our Strength, a nonprofit anti-hunger organization in Washington, DC. The grant covered the startup costs for a breakfast program in Elim, which was then the last village school in the district not serving breakfast. The grant also funded a switch to hot breakfasts one day per week. Instead of the usual fare of muffins, dry cereal and fry bread, the students could enjoy breakfast pizzas, hot pockets, and other specialty items. The hot breakfasts have continued since that time, Kotongan said, and they help keep the students interested and coming back for more.

retain less when school is out. They are more likely to be tardy to school, suspended from school, or to repeat a grade.²³ In short, hungry children cannot learn.

Any child at a participating school may access school meals, and children with demonstrated financial need may receive meals for free or at a reduced price. Ordinarily, the child’s parent will fill out an application at the beginning of each school year and declare the household’s income. Children from households below 130 percent of the poverty line receive free meals, and children below 185 percent receive reduced-price meals.²⁴

As with the Food Stamp Program, the federal government bears the cost of these benefits, and there is also a small federal subsidy for students paying full price. “Severe need” schools receive higher reimbursements.²⁵ Alaska’s schools also receive higher reimbursements than the contiguous 48 states due to the higher costs of running the program here. While the school meals programs are entitlement programs—meaning that no qualified child at a participating school can legally be denied benefits—schools themselves are not required to participate in any of the programs in Alaska. In other words, a child may qualify for free breakfast or lunch but attend a school that does not offer a meal service.

During the 2005-06 school year, 433 Alaska schools participated in the National School Lunch Program. Of the 103,803 children enrolled in participating schools, 33,525 (32 percent) qualified for free lunch and 9,046 (9 percent) qualified for reduced-price lunch.²⁶ According to state officials, the school lunch program has excellent coverage in Alaska, with only a handful of schools not participating.²⁷

Participation in the School Breakfast Program in Alaska lags far behind. According to data published by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), 33 percent of children who received a free or reduced-price school lunch also received a school breakfast in Alaska during the 2005-06 school year. This participation level puts Alaska in 48th place among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Once again, this underutilization costs Alaska federal nutrition dollars that are not going to Alaska’s schools, businesses and children. FRAC estimates that Alaska could bring in \$1.9 million in additional federal funding by raising breakfast participation to 60 percent of lunch participation, which is near the level of the states with the highest participation in 2005-06.²⁸

Part of the reason for this shortfall is that many fewer Alaska schools offer breakfast than lunch. During the 2005-06 school year, 146 Alaska schools did not offer breakfast (Table 3).²⁹ Over 10,000 children who qualified for free and reduced-price school meals attended those schools. The majority of non-participating schools were in rural Alaska, where high food prices, small student populations, and limited resources make it difficult for schools to enroll in the program. Some districts, including the Bering Strait School District, have surmounted these challenges and offered breakfast at all of their schools (see box, “Success Stories”).

Table 3: Distribution of Participating and Non-Participating Schools in the School Breakfast Program, 2005-06 School Year			
	Participating Schools	Non-Participating Schools	Low-Income Children at Non-Participating Schools
Anchorage Municipality*	41	34	3,248
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	30	1	94
Fairbanks North Star Borough	29	0	0
Kenai Peninsula Borough	13	20	1,877
Juneau City and Borough**	0	10	835
Balance of State	143	81	4,100
State Total	256	146	10,154
<i>Source: State of Alaska, Department of Education and Early Development, Child Nutrition Services</i> <i>*Anchorage high schools participated in neither the breakfast program nor the lunch program during the 2005-06 school year, so free and reduced-price eligibility data are not available. Consequently, eight high schools are counted neither as "participating" nor as "non-participating."</i> <i>**In Juneau, some schools have grassroots breakfast programs not connected with the federal program.</i>			

In areas on the road system, breakfast availability is mixed. The Fairbanks North Star Borough School District and Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District have excellent breakfast participation: Fairbanks has 100 percent coverage and Mat-Su is missing only one school. In contrast, many schools in the Anchorage School District, the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, and the Juneau School District are not serving breakfast. During the 2005-06 school year, there were 3,248 low-income students in Anchorage, 1,877 on the Kenai peninsula, and 835 in Juneau who attended schools without federally-funded breakfast. Even in urban Alaska, establishing a new breakfast program involves significant costs to school districts, and the federal reimbursements may not be enough to recoup those costs.

The shortage of schools offering breakfast is not the only factor contributing to low student participation in the School Breakfast Program. A second factor is that not all eligible students at participating schools are eating breakfast. While many of these students no doubt eat at home, others may not arrive at school in time for breakfast due to bus schedules or parents' commuting schedules. Some children are not physiologically ready to eat at the very early hour when breakfast is typically served. There may also be some stigma attached to school breakfast if it is viewed as something only "poor kids" do.³⁰

Out-of-School-Time Programs

The danger of childhood hunger does not, of course, end when the school's doors close at the end of the day or the beginning of summer vacation. Additional federal resources exist to help provide food to children outside of school hours. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides reimbursements to summer schools, parks and recreation sites, Boys and Girls Clubs, camps, and other sites located in high-need areas. To qualify as an SFSP site, a meal provider must be located within the attendance area of a school with 50 percent or more students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals. Alternatively, a site may qualify if at least 50 percent of its enrolled children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. If either of those criteria is met, the program will provide reimbursements for meals served to all children at the site.

The Summer Food Service Program is one of the most underutilized federal nutrition resources in Alaska. Only 1,818 Alaskan children received summer meals in 2005, representing 6 percent of all children receiving free and reduced-price school lunch statewide. Alaska's summer food enrollment puts it in 50th place among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Alaska could bring in an additional \$551,719 in federal nutrition funding by raising summer food participation to 40 percent—again, a reasonable goal that is close to where the high-participation states are now.³¹

The primary reason for this shortfall in summer food participation is the small number of SFSP sites in the state (Table 4). In the summer of 2006 there were 36 summer food sites statewide. Anchorage and Fairbanks claimed almost two-thirds of the sites, and most areas of the state—including such high-poverty areas as Bethel, Dillingham, and Northwest Arctic Borough—had no federally sponsored summer food programs at all.³² Even in apparently well-represented areas, the number of potentially hungry children far outstrips the number of summer food providers. In Anchorage, there were 771 children who qualified for free and reduced-price meals for every SFSP site, 695 in Fairbanks North Star Borough, and 2,470 in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.³³ Since a typical site in Alaska serves approximately 40-60 children, the existing sites are not nearly enough to meet the need.

During the school year, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides reimbursements for after-school snacks. This part of the program has similar eligibility criteria to the Summer Food Service Program. CACFP also covers meals served at child care centers, family day care homes, and homeless shelters serving low-income children; and adult care programs that serve elderly or functionally impaired adults.

During FY05, CACFP provided meal reimbursements to 198 child care centers and 511 family day care homes in Alaska, and \$6.45 million in federal funding came to Alaska through the program.³⁴ Because it is difficult to determine how many eligible people are not being served by this program, estimates of the participation rate or additional unclaimed federal resources are not available. According to the coordinator for CACFP at the State's Department of Education and Early Development, the program is well-utilized among Head Start agencies and non-profit child care centers.

A major gap in CACFP coverage is likely to be in after-school programs. State officials believe that there are many nonprofit groups, churches, and tribes running activities and homework clubs that may be eligible for snack reimbursements, but are not aware of the program and are not known to state CACFP officials.³⁵ It is also likely that there are family day care homes, shelters, and adult care centers in Alaska that could be receiving reimbursements through CACFP but have not connected with the program.

**Table 4:
Summer Food Service Program Sites
by Borough or Census Area, 2006**

Borough / Census Area	Sites
Anchorage Municipality	17
Fairbanks North Star Borough	6
Kenai Peninsula Borough, Prince of Wales	3 (each)
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	2
Juneau City and Borough, Nome, Southeast Fairbanks, Wade-Hampton, Yakutat	1 (each)
Aleutians East, Aleutians West, Bethel, Bristol Bay, Dillingham, Haines, Ketchikan Gateway, Kodiak, Lake and Peninsula, North Slope, Northwest Arctic, Sitka, Skagway, Valdez, Wrangell-Petersburg, Yukon-Koyukuk	0

The WIC Program

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, better known as the WIC program, serves the youngest Alaskans at the most critical stages of development. The program provides food, nutrition education, and other health services to pregnant women, new mothers, infants, and children under age five. To qualify for WIC, applicants must be living below 185 percent of the poverty line and must be certified by a health professional to be at nutritional risk. WIC benefits may be redeemed at grocery stores for a pre-approved set of foods, including milk, cheese, eggs, peanut butter, juice, cereal, beans, infant formula, tuna, and carrots. In Alaska, 17 local agencies under the state Office of Children's Services (OCS) administer WIC benefits and services.

WIC has been recognized as one of the most effective of the federal nutrition programs, and its success has been documented in study after study. WIC has been proven to reduce premature births, low birth weight, and infant death. Thanks to these improved birth outcomes, each dollar of WIC spending reduces Medicaid expenses for infants and new mothers by \$1.77 to \$3.13. Other studies document higher functioning on cognitive indicators, such as vocabulary and memory for numbers, among children of mothers who participated in WIC prenatally.³⁶

WIC served 26,840 new mothers, mothers-to-be and children in Alaska during FY05. The program brought in \$14,751,060 worth of food vouchers—which, in addition to helping WIC clients, increased the sales of grocers and village stores across the state.³⁷ The WIC Farmer's Market Program, a seasonal program that provides vouchers for Alaska-grown produce at farmer's markets, gives an additional boost to WIC clients and Alaskan farmers during the summer months.³⁸

As with CACFP, the proportion of WIC-eligible Alaskans who are participating is not possible to quantify, since reliable data on "nutritional risk" do not exist. According to a report commissioned by the OCS, WIC administrators believe that "there are under-served populations in all regions of Alaska, which potentially could include members of ethnic minorities, Native Alaskans and the homeless." WIC participation is adversely affected by language and cultural barriers, such as a lack of affordable translation services for local WIC clinics. The list of food items approved for WIC, which emphasizes dairy products, may not be appropriate for some Alaska Native and Asian clients, who have relatively high rates of lactose intolerance. This lack of culturally appropriate alternatives may have a chilling effect on participation. Finally, as with most of the nutrition programs, the geographic dispersal of clients across the state is a major challenge for the 17 local WIC agencies.³⁹

Commodity Programs

Some federal nutrition programs work through the emergency food system to distribute commodity foods directly to people in need. The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) pairs the goals of supporting the U.S. agriculture industry and providing food assistance. The State of Alaska receives commodities and administrative funds from USDA and contracts with Food Bank of Alaska to distribute the food through its statewide partner agency network. The eligibility rules and application process for TEFAP are much simpler than most other federal nutrition programs. The primary eligibility criterion is a self-declaration of household income below 185 percent of the poverty level. Clients enrolled in TEFAP receive a monthly box of food. TEFAP commodities are also used to prepare meals at schools, emergency shelters, and soup kitchens.

TEFAP is especially important to Alaska. Due to an oversight in the federal tax code that prevents food banks from distributing donated foods to tribes, TEFAP is the only resource Food Bank of Alaska has to serve remote Alaska Native villages. In the last quarter of FY06, TEFAP served a monthly average of 13,686 individuals in 4,497 households in Alaska. In FY06, Alaska received \$672,766 in commodities and \$102,273 in federal funds for storage and transportation.⁴⁰ TEFAP funding levels make no provision for the exceptional costs of shipping to rural Alaska, so the TEFAP funding for storage and transportation covers only half of the actual cost of administering the program.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) provides a monthly box of nutritious foods to low-income seniors, pregnant and postpartum women, and children under age six. Nearly 90 percent of CSFP clients are seniors. Women and children may not access both WIC and CSFP at the same time. The State of Alaska contracts with Food Bank of Alaska and Fairbanks Community Food Bank to administer CSFP through the emergency food network. The program currently serves approximately 2,277 needy Alaskans. In 2006, funding limitations forced painful cuts in the CSFP caseload and pushed hundreds of clients onto a waiting list.

There is another commodity program that is not available at all in Alaska—the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). FDPIR provides a very generous monthly box of commodity foods to Native Americans and non-Natives who live in the geographic area of a Native tribe. Applicants for FDPIR must also meet eligibility criteria similar to that of the Food Stamp Program, and individuals may not be enrolled in both FDPIR and food stamps at the same time. While food stamp benefits are higher in rural Alaska than in urban Alaska or the Lower 48, local food prices are extraordinarily high in some remote villages, making FDPIR an attractive alternative. Thousands of Alaska Natives would be eligible for the program if it were expanded to Alaska, and Food Bank of Alaska is currently advocating for this expansion.

In contrast to the other nutrition programs, it is the federal resources available, rather than local implementation and participation, which is the main constraint facing the commodity programs in Alaska. Limitations in federal funding have, in the past few years, forced a moratorium on new TEFAP distribution sites, led to cutbacks in CSFP caseloads, and prevented the expansion of CSFP beyond the road system. In the case of FDPIR, a significant federal food resource has not been made available to hungry Alaskans at all.

3. Policy Recommendations

With one in eight Alaskan households facing a constant struggle against hunger and millions of dollars in federal nutrition resources available but unclaimed, improving access to and participation in the federal nutrition programs should be a top policy priority in Alaska. This section draws on the findings in the previous section to recommend specific measures to accomplish these goals. It describes ways in which state officials, the emergency food network, the broader nonprofit community, schools, tribal organizations, and businesses can work together to help all Alaskans achieve food security.

Prioritize Food Stamp Outreach, Especially in Urban Alaska

The Food Stamp Program accounts for the largest share of unclaimed federal nutrition funding, so food stamp outreach must be a top priority of anti-hunger efforts in Alaska. Outreach activities include informing potential clients about the program, pre-screening them for eligibility, and helping them prepare for the application process. The target audience is people who are qualified but unaware of their eligibility. Since Anchorage and Fairbanks lag behind rural Alaska in participation and are home to the majority of the state's unserved eligible people, food stamp outreach has the greatest potential for gains in Alaska's largest cities.

The emergency food network, as the first responder to hunger in Alaska, can play a leading role in food stamp outreach. Food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens can help disseminate information about food stamps to their clients, screen them for eligibility, and provide support and advocacy through the application process. Food Bank of Alaska now works with its network of partner agencies to provide food stamp “clinics,” which help food pantry clients connect with the Food Stamp Program during regular pantry hours.

In many parts of the country, food retailers have become excellent partners in food stamp outreach. The grocery store is a logical place for outreach because it reaches people when they are thinking about food, and it is a boon to retailers because higher food stamp enrollment translates directly into new revenues for them.⁴¹ In partnership with retailers, anti-hunger organizations and state public assistance officials have hosted outreach events inside grocery stores in Tennessee, Indiana, New York, and other states. One noteworthy effort in Kansas combined the efforts of the Wichita Food Bank, the Dillons grocery chain, and Governor Kathleen Sebelius, who launched the program.⁴²

State officials can also support food stamp outreach efforts by helping to leverage federal dollars for outreach. The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides grants for food stamp outreach and will match state-level outreach spending dollar for dollar. (The state government itself need not be the source of the state-level matching funds.) For example, the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) contracts with the state to receive the federal match for a statewide program to operate food stamp outreach through the emergency food system. To date, Alaska has not taken advantage of this opportunity to bring in federal matching funds for food stamp outreach.

Provide Support for Schools to Serve Breakfast

Another excellent opportunity for intervention in the federal nutrition programs is helping more of Alaska's schools to serve breakfast. A concerted effort to eliminate the barriers between schools and the breakfast program is necessary to ensure that all low-income Alaskan children have access to a healthy breakfast. As the research on school breakfast demonstrates, such an investment can pay dividends in reduced tardiness and truancy, more attentive students, and higher test scores.⁴³ School superintendents, food service directors, principals, teachers, nurses, and parent groups can all have a role in championing school breakfast in their own districts and among their peers.

However, school officials need not and should not do it alone. The state legislature and Governor can provide incentives to schools by providing startup grants for those not serving breakfast, and by providing a modest state match for the federal meal reimbursements. Such assistance is especially needed in rural Alaska, where fewer schools serve breakfast due to high costs and limited resources. Many states have also adopted mandates for "high-need" schools, e.g. schools where more than 25 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, to provide breakfast. Coupled with financial assistance for schools, a mandate could dramatically improve access to school breakfast in Alaska.

There are also opportunities to increase student participation at schools already offering breakfast. Schools can reduce the potential stigma of school breakfast by marketing it to all students, not just low-income students, and by ensuring that the payment process in the cafeteria does not make it

Success Story: *Linking Turkeys and Food Stamps in Anchorage*

For the past three years, Food Bank of Alaska has joined with faith communities across Anchorage to put on a project called Anchorage Thanksgiving Blessing, a one-day distribution of turkeys and fixings. In 2006, Anchorage Thanksgiving Blessing helped 3,900 families put a holiday meal on the table. For the first time, four of the Thanksgiving Blessing sites also provided clients with an opportunity to get help feeding their families year-round by connecting with the Food Stamp Program.

In partnership with the state Division of Public Assistance, Central Region, FBA set up food stamp outreach booths in the client waiting areas. Clients were invited to take informational materials and fill out a short, anonymous questionnaire to screen them for eligibility. Trained volunteers then put the answers into a computer program and informed the clients whether they were likely to be eligible or not. Clients also received information on where to apply for benefits and what documents to collect for a successful application. Public Assistance caseworkers were on hand to assist clients and answer questions.

Claire Thompson was one of the clients who successfully connected with the Food Stamp Program through Thanksgiving Blessing. A few months before, she fell on hard times when her husband walked out on her and their teenage son. Before long, notices of overdue mortgage and utility payments were piling up, and she was turning to friends for food. At Thanksgiving Blessing, a friend urged her to go through the food stamp screening, and she learned that she was eligible. After two visits to the Public Assistance office on Muldoon Road, she was approved for benefits.

"It makes a tremendous difference—I have food in my home now," Thompson said. "When in doubt, you go where you can for help. No matter how difficult it is to take that step, you should do it anyway."

Note: the client's name was changed to protect her privacy.

obvious who is receiving free or reduced-price meals. To overcome barriers to student participation, many states and schools have devised alternatives to the traditional cafeteria model of breakfast delivery.⁴⁴ Breakfast in the Classroom ensures all students have the opportunity to eat and eliminates the stigma of cafeteria breakfast. If a large portion of students qualify for free and reduced-price meals, schools can affordably offer Breakfast in the Classroom for free to all students. Grab-and-Go Breakfast, which enables students to take a portable breakfast with them, and Second Chance Breakfast, which allows students to eat breakfast after their first class, may be more effective for older students who pass between classes many times per day and may not be ready to eat first thing in the morning. These models could be replicated in Alaska.

The nonprofit and business communities can also help by providing financial support and with technical assistance and best practices. In Oregon, the pizza chain Pizza Schmizza has worked through the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force to give small startup grants to schools interested in adopting Breakfast in the Classroom.⁴⁵ In California, the nonprofit California Food Policy Advocates is spearheading a campaign to increase breakfast participation through research, technical assistance, identification and sharing of best practices, and state-level policy development.⁴⁶

Recruit Sites for the Out-of-School-Time Programs

Alaska has a significant shortage of sites serving meals and snacks to low-income children outside of school hours. Therefore, recruiting and assisting new sites for the Summer Food Service Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program would be another high priority for all stakeholders.

School districts, youth organizations, food banks, and tribal organizations can intervene in these programs as sponsors. Sponsors train and oversee feeding sites, manage most of the paperwork involved with running the program, manage sites' relationships with the state agency, and claim the federal reimbursements on the sites' behalf. By taking on these responsibilities, sponsors reduce the administrative barriers to new sites so that they can concentrate on feeding hungry children.

There are undoubtedly many churches, villages, tribes, and housing authorities throughout the state that are already providing activities and food to children but are not aware of the opportunity for reimbursement. Members of the news media and public officials on the state and local level can raise the profile of these programs and encourage both prospective sites and children to participate. A kickoff event or a little bit of publicity is often all a site needs to take on with the local children and, through the reimbursements that follow, become financially viable.

Advocate for FDPIR and Other Commodity Supports

Since the federal resources available for commodity programs have reached their limit in Alaska, federal-level advocacy is the most urgent need on this front. Tribes and Native nonprofits, along with the emergency food network, must actively seek an expansion of FDPIR to Alaska. TEFAP will not grow further without additional funding, including funding for storage and transportation. The same is true for CSFP. Organizations and clients currently being served by these programs, as well as those being denied access by funding limitations, need to highlight the critical role of these resources in Alaska and make the case for their preservation and expansion.

During the 2007 session, the U.S. Congress is expected to pass a new Farm Bill, a piece of legislation that will set policy for many farm and nutrition programs for the next five years. TEFAP, CSFP and FDPIR, along with the Food Stamp Program, are all included in the Farm Bill. Therefore, the 2007 Farm Bill represents one of the best opportunities for anti-hunger advocates across Alaska to make a difference in these programs. Alaska's two U.S. Senators and one U.S. Representative will be involved in the Farm Bill process, so Alaskans must make their concerns about the nutrition programs known to these officials throughout the year.

A related opportunity for advocacy is seeking a change in the federal tax code to enable Alaska Native and American Indian tribes to become eligible recipients of donated food. As discussed in the previous section, an oversight in the tax code prevents food banks from distributing any food from private donors to tribes. In May 2005, Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska introduced a bill to make the needed change, but the bill did not make it to a vote in the Senate.⁴⁷ With a new Congress in 2007, a concerted advocacy effort will be necessary to draw attention to the need for this legislation and to build the political momentum for its passage.

Simplify Program Administration and Build Connections Between Programs

There is a large range of federal, state, tribal, and private resources available to Alaskans in need to help them meet the necessities of life. Unfortunately, these resources are subject to a dizzying array of requirements and administrative procedures. A client receiving one benefit may not hear about another benefit that could also help his or her situation, and accessing the other benefit may require more paperwork, expense, and time lost from work or family responsibilities.

Simplifying program rules and procedures not only makes life easier for clients, it can also reduce the costs and bureaucracy of running the programs on a state or local level. Better use of resources in one program can reduce costs in another. For example, WIC benefits have been demonstrated to reduce Medicaid expenses by a more than proportional amount. Different human needs impact each other, so the programs designed to address those needs should be linked accordingly.

One policy measure that can accomplish both the simplification goal and the connections goal is aligning the eligibility criteria of different programs more closely. The 2002 Farm Bill gave states the option of aligning their income and/or resource requirements for the Food Stamp Program with those of Medicaid and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, known in Alaska as the Alaska Temporary Assistance Program or ATAP). The option allows certain types of income and resources that are not counted by Medicaid and TANF to be excluded from food stamp eligibility as well. This policy has the double effect of simplifying the programs and making more people eligible. To date, Alaska has not elected this option.⁴⁸ On a more positive note, Alaska has embraced an option known as expanded categorical eligibility, which makes households receiving non-cash benefits from TANF automatically approved for food stamps.⁴⁹

Outside of the policy arena, state and nonprofit agencies can work more closely together to integrate different services. An excellent guiding principle is “No Wrong Door,” which is the name of initiatives in several states to coordinate among different agencies and service providers.⁵⁰ The goal of No Wrong Door is to provide seamless connections between programs—through information, referrals and pre-screening for benefits—regardless of where clients begin to access services.

Success Story: *Summer Food Brings Community Together in Yakutat*

Yakutat, a predominantly Tlingit community of 883 people located in the narrowest part of the Alaska panhandle, was home to a remarkable summer food site in the summer of 2006. The town faces challenges similar to those found in many rural Alaskan communities: high unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, and child abuse and neglect. Eighty percent of Yakutat School District students qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. During the summer months, when school is closed and many of the adults are away at fish camp, the town offers little for children to do.

Candy Hills, the owner of Monti Bay Foods, the local grocery store, noticed children coming into her store hungry. Through an acquaintance at a health fair, she learned about the Summer Food Service Program and enlisted the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe as a sponsor. They developed “Pride in Our Community and Pride in Ourselves” as a theme and lined up a wide variety of activities. Each day, local children could get a free lunch at Monti Bay Foods and stay for kayaking, bird watching, beach cleanup, and classes ranging from gun safety to pet care to crocheting. A key component of the program’s success was donations of time from Yakutat elders, U.S. Forest Service employees, sport fishermen, and other volunteers. The tribe, the City of Yakutat, the Forest Service, and several businesses provided financial support for the programming. As a grand finale, the Tribe held a back-to-school celebration and flew in a professional magician from Anchorage.

Over the course of the summer, the program served 4,408 meals to as many as 70 children per day—though attendance was sometimes dampened by bad weather and wandering bears. “We had an awful lot of parents tell us what a relief it was to know the kids were getting fed,” Hills said. “When you’re trying to catch up on winter bills and don’t have to worry about feeding the kids, the money goes a lot farther.”

The summer program also positively affected the community as a whole. “The whole community came together and volunteered,” Hills said. “It was fun for the adults to work with the kids on a different level.” Many people observed a decline in incidents of underage drinking and child neglect that summer, Hills added. “The community was thrilled.”

4. Conclusion

The bad news is that hunger is a serious and worsening problem in Alaska. More than 83,000 Alaskans rely on food pantries, soup kitchens, and other emergency food programs each year. During a period of economic growth, the proportion of Alaskan households struggling to put enough food on the table climbed from one in eleven to one in eight. Hunger does not just hurt the hungry—it erodes the quality of Alaska’s communities and saps the potential of its students, workers, and citizens.

The good news is that there are many tools available to fight hunger, and all of them could be used more effectively in Alaska. Every year our state is leaving millions of dollars in federal nutrition funding on the table. Those funds could be leveraged for a comparatively small investment at the state level. The strategies needed to capture those funds vary depending on the program. In the Food Stamp Program, the primary need is for outreach; for school nutrition, it is startup supports for school breakfast; for other programs it is greater local-level involvement in implementation and advocacy.

However, the common thread in these recommendations is that taking full advantage of these programs will require cooperation from the full range of stakeholders—elected and appointed state and local officials, emergency food providers and other nonprofits, tribes, schools, and businesses. In a state as vast and diverse as Alaska, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for ending hunger, so addressing the issue must be everyone’s concern. Hunger is a solvable problem, and Alaska has the tools to solve it.

5. Resources

Food Bank of Alaska: <http://www.foodbankofalaska.org>

Alaska Food Coalition: <http://www.alaskafood.org>

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services:

Division of Public Assistance, Food Stamp Program:

<http://health.hss.state.ak.us/dpa/programs/fstamps/>

Office of Children’s Services, WIC Program: <http://www.hss.state.ak.us/ocs/nutri/wic/>

Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, Child Nutrition Services:

National School Lunch Program: <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/cns/NSLP.html>

Summer Food Service Program: <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/cns/sfsp/home.html>

Child and Adult Care Food Program: <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/cns/CACFP.html>

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/default.htm>

Food Research and Action Center: <http://www.frac.org>

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2121 Spar Avenue • Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 272-3663 • (907) 277-7368 fax
www.foodbankofalaska.org • info@foodbankofalaska.org