



HUNGER, NUTRITION AND HEALTH ROUNDTABLE WITH REP. SUZANNE BONAMICI

Remarks from Susannah Morgan — as prepared for delivery 7.8.22

Hello, folx. I am Susannah Morgan, Oregon Food Bank CEO. It is an honor to participate in this roundtable with so many other great organizations to talk with you today, Congresswoman.

A bit of background on our work at Oregon Food Bank: Our mission is to eliminate hunger AND its root causes – and we do that in two ways:

- We work to ensure our community has the food we need today
- **And** we work to change the systems and policies that create and perpetuate hunger.

For some perspective, the Oregon Food Bank Network is among the largest in the country, with a central warehouse that provides resources to 21 regional food banks. Those regional food banks support over 1,400 pantries, free food markets and meal sites across Oregon and Southwest Washington. And even at our scale – we move millions of meals worth of food each month and welcomed more than 1.2 million people last year – we will *never* be able to solve hunger with food alone. Because hunger is not primarily a result of personal choices.

Hunger is a community-wide symptom of systems that perpetuate poverty and injustice. And poverty and hunger are the result of racial, gender and economic inequities and other forms of oppression. So if we want to truly end hunger for good, we need to change the systems that drive it. That's a big challenge – but it doesn't discourage me; it excites me. Because we humans built those systems in the first place and we humans can change them.

We can prioritize the policies and investments that are needed to build communities that never know hunger – through living-wage jobs, affordable housing and childcare, and structural investments in communities. We need strong government safety nets to ensure *everyone* has access to food. Food banks should be the last resort when other systems have failed – even with our scale, we can't match the impact of federal initiatives like SNAP and WIC.

Federal pandemic relief offers a clear window into these impacts:

- Congressional aid reached communities directly through enhanced unemployment and SNAP benefits, relief payments to families, and more.
- And legislation like the Child Tax Credit drove down child poverty by an incredible 41%¹ and reduced food insecurity by 26%².
- Combined, these actions helped us to meet the crisis head-on and ensure that hunger did not spiral out of control.

¹ <https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/news-internal/monthly-poverty-january-2022>

² <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2788110>

And so I come with a few suggestions on what it will take to truly end hunger here in Oregon. And these ideas aren't just the words of Oregon Food Bank's CEO. These are solutions that come directly from people experiencing hunger, because they are the true experts.

For the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in particular, we recommend:

- Removing time limits.
- Ending exclusions for immigrants and college students.
- Increasing benefit levels for older adults.
- Establishing parity for Puerto Rico, American Samoa, CNMI.
- Modernizing SNAP to reflect the true cost of healthy food.
- And expanding the "Double-Up Food Bucks" program nationwide at all points of sale, including grocery stores and farmers markets.

For the Child Nutrition Program, we recommend:

- Enacting Healthy School Meals for All.
- Making Summer EBT available nationwide.
- Making the recent improvements to summer meal programs permanent.
- And making changes to the WIC Program by:
 - Increasing the benefit level for fruits and vegetables.
 - Extending nutrition benefits for moms post-partum to two years.
 - Extending WIC eligibility for kids through age 6.

It is also imperative that we reduce barriers to accessing these and other programs.

- Community members should be able to apply for all benefits for which they are eligible in one place.
- And agencies need to do better to provide services in all languages.

Around the Emergency Food System, we recommend:

- Strengthening The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).
- Increasing the volume and variety of food available to states.
- Adjusting CFR 251 to prohibit states from increasing barriers to service, such as requirement to show valid identification, proof of residency, etc.
- And helping states serve communities that cross State boundaries.

As I stated earlier, poverty and systemic racism are the primary root causes of hunger here in Oregon and across the country. So hunger will not be solved in the long run by simply handing out food. We have to change the inequitable and racist structures that have for too long been used to actively exclude Black, Indigineous and other people of color from obtaining economic security.

Here are a few of the most direct ways we can address the root causes of hunger and poverty through policy change:

- Make the monthly child tax credit permanent – and fully refundable. We have recent evidence of how well this works!
- Make housing affordable and accessible. Consistently, people who request food cite housing as the biggest reason for struggling to afford food.
- Make childcare affordable and accessible to everyone.

- Make the Earned Income Tax Credit available to *all* workers, and increase eligibility for people without kids.
- And end policies that result in mass incarceration — a staggering 91% of people who return to our communities from incarceration experience food insecurity.

Our communities can't make healthy choices when we aren't even unable to pay for our essential needs — food, housing, medicine and so on. **It takes more than food alone to end hunger; we have to act on the policies and investments that will address hunger at its roots.**