

## COMBATING HUNGER – I

### UNDERSTANDING FOOD AID IN THE U.S. AND IOWA

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Hunger is a major problem in America. This is the first of several fact sheets for the Iowa Fiscal Partnership about hunger in Iowa and the United States. This piece introduces basic statistics and outlines the major ways that both government and nonprofit food assistance is provided to hungry families.

#### DEFINING THE TERMS

- **Hunger:** “The recurrent and involuntary lack of access to sufficient food due to poverty or constrained resources, which can lead to malnutrition over time.”<sup>1</sup>
- **Food Insecurity:** “The lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources.”<sup>2</sup>

Hunger and food insecurity can have harmful effects on many aspects of personal and societal well-being, such as physical and mental health and development, family life, and work and productivity.

#### SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

- USDA estimate of U.S. households experiencing **hunger** in 2003 ..... **3.9 million**<sup>3</sup>
- USDA estimate of U.S. households experiencing **food insecurity** in 2003 ..... **1 in 10**<sup>4</sup>

#### WHO PROVIDES ASSISTANCE

- For the past 40 years government and nonprofits have shared responsibility for food and nutrition assistance to the hungry. (See Figure 1.)

#### WHO GETS ASSISTANCE

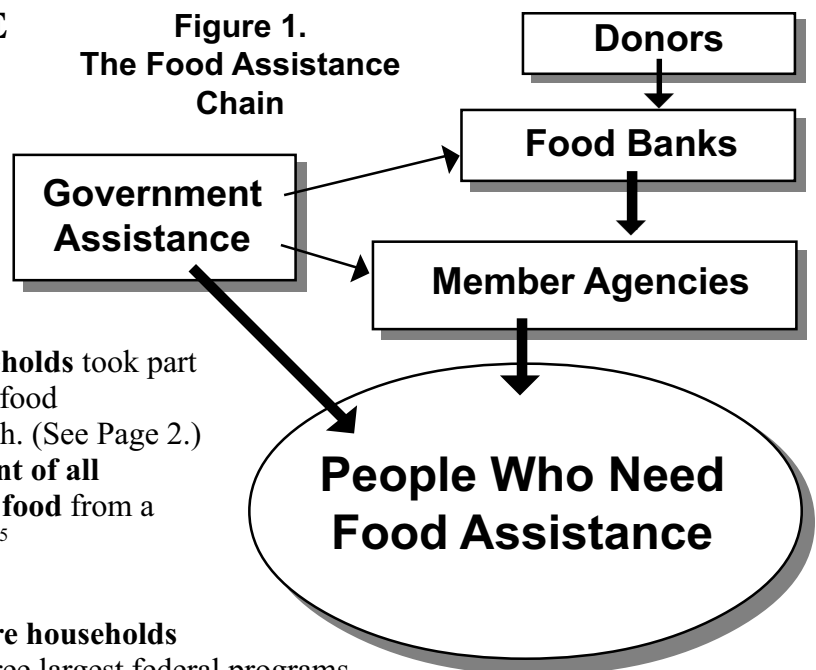
According to a 2000 survey:

- **One-half of food-insecure households** took part in at least one of the three largest federal food assistance programs in the previous month. (See Page 2.)
- **About 17 percent – or 2.4 percent of all U.S. households – obtained emergency food** from a food pantry at some time during the year.<sup>5</sup>

By 2003, the percentages had increased:

- **Fifty-six percent of food-insecure households** received assistance through one of the three largest federal programs.
- **Twenty percent of food-insecure households – or 3.1 percent of all U.S. households – obtained emergency food** from a nonprofit operation during the year.<sup>6</sup>

While increases in participation in both government and public programs are not statistically significant, they demonstrate that the problem of hunger and food insecurity has not abated in the past three years, and may, in fact, be growing.



## GOVERNMENT FOOD ASSISTANCE (the three largest programs)

■ **The Food Assistance Program (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program):** This program provides an electronic benefit card to low-income families, to be used in grocery stores and other food venues on approved food items. A value is placed on the card each month and the balance is drawn down as food is purchased. In Iowa in 2003, about 154,000 people received Food Stamps.<sup>7</sup>

■ **National School Lunch Program:** This program provides lunches to qualifying children for free or at a reduced price. The meals must follow nutritional guidelines. In Iowa in 2003, about 381,000 children participated.<sup>8</sup>

■ **The Special Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC):** This program targets food, education and health referral benefits to low-income pregnant women and young children (up to age 5).<sup>9</sup> In Iowa in 2003, about 65,000 people participated.<sup>10</sup>

## NONPROFIT FOOD ASSISTANCE

■ **Commonly, nonprofit food assistance is distributed through emergency food providers (EFPs),** which have existed in the U.S. for over 200 years and have grown from stopgap roles to become an integral component of local food assistance networks.<sup>11</sup>

■ **Common EFPs are food pantries,** which distribute free food and groceries, or soup kitchens and shelters, which provide meals on-site. In addition, child-care and senior centers, nursing homes and other programs receive food assistance and provide meals and snacks, and distribute food.

■ **Run by charities,** EFPs receive food from direct donations, or more commonly from food banks.

■ **Food banks** are generally community-centered warehouses that solicit, store and distribute food from local producers, retail sources, the federal Commodity Distribution program, and the food industry.<sup>12</sup> Food banks distribute the surplus food to EFPs. Beyond food, financing for food banks and EFPs comes from donations and government support, including local government support.<sup>13</sup>

## AN IOWA EXAMPLE: THE NORTHEAST IOWA FOOD BANK

■ Iowa is served by six food banks, all members of America's Second Harvest, the nation's largest domestic hunger relief organization, representing over 200 food banks.<sup>13</sup> **One is the Northeast Iowa Food Bank, which serves 200 EFPs running over 300 programs in 16 Northeast Iowa counties.**

■ The EFPs served by the Northeast Iowa Food Bank annually **distribute, on average, 4.5 million pounds of food.** These EFPs include food pantries, emergency shelters, soup kitchens and day cares.

■ Besides distributing bulk food through EFPs, the **Northeast Iowa Food Bank** runs, or collaborates with other organizations on, four programs: **the Cedar Valley Food Pantry** to provide emergency and supplemental food; **the Kids Cafe program** to provide children an evening meal in a safe, friendly setting; **Operation Family Pack**, providing back packs full of food to children in need; and the **Elderly Food Box** program, which distributes food to the elderly in need.

<sup>1,2,3</sup> FRAC [http://www.frac.org/html/hunger\\_in\\_the\\_us/hunger\\_index.html](http://www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger_index.html) accessed on April 19, 2005.

<sup>4,6</sup> Household Food Security in the United States, 2003, by Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. (FANRR42) 69 pp, October 2004. Accessed via web at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/fanrr42/> on April 19, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Nord, M., Kabbani, N., Tiehen, L., Andrews, M., Bickel, G., & Carlson, S. (2002, February). Household food security in the United States, 2000. (Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 21). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture.

<sup>7,8,10</sup> Food for All? The Status of Hunger in Iowa, Iowa State University Extension, January 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Food and Nutrition Service, "about WIC" at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/aboutwic/default.htm>. Accessed April 19, 2005.

<sup>11-12</sup> Nichols-Casebolt, A., & Morris, P.M. (2001, January) Making ends meet: Private food assistance and the working poor. (Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no. 1222-01). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Institute for Research on Poverty. p. 5

<sup>13</sup> Part of extreme western Iowa is served by the Nebraska Food Bank Network. Another America's Second Harvest member food bank, based in Moline, Illinois, serves eastern Iowa.