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Collaborative Public Management as a Hunger Prevention Strategy

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Abstract: *Collaboration between public and private partners in the food assistance network is critical to reducing hunger. Access to safe, nutritious, and affordable food is a public health concern best addressed through a multi-sector, multi-prong approach. Extension programs across the United States provide community-based responses to hunger and can use their considerable resources to partner with governmental and nonprofit actors to boost participation in federally funded nutrition assistance programs to take full advantage of the dollars already appropriated for hunger relief and to generate economic benefits for communities at large.*

Introduction

To say hunger is a major policy issue is an understatement. The problem is pervasive. The national rate of low or very low food security in the United States has increased every year since 1998 (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2009). Recent estimates suggest 50 million people struggle daily with where their next meal will come due to a lack of money or other resources for basic nutrition (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews & Carlson, 2011). According to Feeding America, the nation's largest nonprofit hunger relief network, more than a third of working households were food insecure in 2010 (Feeding America, 2012). To put hunger in context, consider the headlines, and major public and private research funding dedicated to cancer, to which 569,490 deaths and 1.6 million new diagnoses were attributed in 2010 (American Cancer Society, 2010).

Public and private organizations, including Extension offices, work in various ways to ameliorate the effects of hunger. The problem is that most work as silos rather than parts of a system. Increasing interorganizational and intersectoral collaboration would lead toward more coordinated, better-utilized hunger response programs.

Nutrition education through home Extension programs and EFNEP is one tool used to curb the effects of hunger. Food banks and local pantries provide food resources. Local departments of social services distribute nutrition assistance benefits passed to state agencies through federal appropriations.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Governmental food assistance comes from multiple sources, including school lunch and breakfast programs, the Special Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and, most notably, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Federal funding is allocated to states based on the number of people who enroll in SNAP. According to the USDA in 2009 approximately one third of those eligible for the program received no benefits (Snap: Frequently asked, 2010). The problem is that a number of eligible households never apply for SNAP benefits, reducing the food resources individually and for communities at large. But there is a solution. By collaborating with community organizations to boost participation rates through outreach and educational efforts, states can draw down more federally allocated SNAP dollars.

Collaboration as a Response to Hunger

Collaboration among university, community, government, and nonprofit partners focused on hunger prevention has produced positive, important results. Collaborative public management is employed when problems are too difficult for a single organization to solve alone (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; O'Leary, 2006). The partnership between Extension programs and community food pantries is a rich array of collaborative and sometimes innovative effort ranging from public relations campaigns (Grogan, 1993), research efforts to document

community health (Greder, Garasky, & Klein, 2007) or program design (for example, see Remley et al., 2006).

Extension offers good examples of collaboration to address hunger (for example see Koszewski, Sehi, Behrends, & Tuttle, 2011).

Educational programs, including those offered by Extension agents and EFNEP paraprofessionals, give participants information on nutritional guidelines, sources of healthy fresh foods, cooking tips, information about SNAP eligibility and guidelines, and other resources that connect people and resources in ways that combat hunger (Mondrone, 1991).

In Alaska, Kansas, and New Hampshire, programs focus on increasing food stamp redemption at local farmers' markets through teaching vendors to use and accept electronic benefit cards. Oregon State University Extension Service provides food security programming through a Web-based series, while a more formal collaboration between the Oklahoma Department of Human Services and Oklahoma State University Extension service provides nutrition education to food stamp recipients and other eligible low-income households. The University of Maine tracks community gardens as a part of its Harvest for Hunger program operated through the Extension service.

These are good examples, but what if existing Extension programs partnered with local departments of social services, regional nonprofit food banks, and community food pantries to increase potentially eligible individuals' knowledge of and participation in SNAP? One case can be found in North Carolina, where this sort of collaboration is happening. North Carolinian children experience food insecurity at a rate of 15.7% while overall 19.6% of all households regularly report having insufficient food (Feeding America, 2012). The state tops the list of 10 worst for hunger.

Even in the face of these daunting numbers, eligible households regularly fail to apply for or receive nutritional assistance through SNAP (or in this case Food and Nutrition Services, the name North Carolina uses for its SNAP funded program). The economic loss to the state tops more than \$698 million in unclaimed benefits, lost jobs, and other multipliers related to lost revenue from eligible households that do not participate in the program (Paynter, Nousaine, & Jolley, 2012).

North Carolina is making strides to close that gap in partnerships created by the state Department of Health and Human Services, regional food banks, community pantries, and Extension programs aimed at providing information and increasing accessibility to the FNS program. The Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina began a program called "Three Squares for Central and Eastern NC" in October 2011. In the pilot phase centered in only six counties, the program is producing positive results. FNS enrollment by eligible households previously not participating in the program has increased. Applicants working with Three Squares staff are rejected at a rate lower than those not affiliated with the program, due to the education that takes place. The challenge for Three Squares is to reach more eligible households. This goal could be addressed through increased partnerships with other agencies including EFNEP and Extension.

Conclusion

Collaboration between public and private partners in the food assistance network is critical to reducing hunger. Access to safe, nutritious, and affordable food is a public health concern that is best addressed through a multi-sector, multi-prong approach. Extension programs across the United States provide community-based responses to the fight against hunger and can use their considerable resources to partner with governmental and nonprofit actors to boost participation in SNAP to take full advantage of the dollars already appropriated for hunger relief.

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