



“Hunger is Not OK”

A report by

Oklahoma Task Force on Hunger

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About the Task Force



In February of 2007, Senator Andrew Rice and Representative Kris Steele brought legislation before the 51st Legislature of the State of Oklahoma proposing the creation of the Oklahoma Task Force on Hunger. This legislation was approved by both chambers and signed into law by Governor Brad Henry on May 4th, 2007.

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Executive Summary

Oklahoma is one of the hungriest states in America. Over the past ten years, the percentage of our population classified by the United States Department of Agriculture as "food insecure" has risen from 13.1 percent to 14.6 percent; the percentage of our population experiencing hunger, classified as those experiencing "very low food security," has risen from 4.2 percent to 5.3 percent. On both measures, Oklahoma ranks as one of the five worst states in the country. The threat of hunger in Oklahoma is especially prevalent among children, as more than one in every five children in our state lives in a "food insecure" household. Due to their special needs, seniors and disabled individuals are also at a disproportionate risk of going hungry in Oklahoma. Oklahoma's hunger problem connected to our state's high poverty rate carries serious costs for Oklahomans. According to a recent study commissioned by the Sodexo Foundation, hunger costs Oklahoma more than \$1.4 billion each year, through increased illness and decreased academic achievement alone. Moreover, food insecurity in Oklahoma contributes to our state's obesity epidemic; the lack of financial resources for adequate food budgets makes it difficult for families to obtain nutritious food on a consistent basis, leading to unhealthy eating patterns and poor dietary habits.

Fortunately, with adequate political will and a focus on best practices, the state of Oklahoma and its diverse set of both public and private organizations can substantially reduce the state's level of food insecurity in the future. The findings of the Oklahoma Task Force on Hunger, detailed in this report, intend to offer sound direction for policymakers, agency officials, and representatives of the charitable community who aim to address Oklahoma's growing hunger problem. The findings of this report reflect the Task Force's four primary recommendations:

1. **Increase Participation in Underutilized Federal Food Programs**: Many of our existing nutrition programs are under-utilized in Oklahoma, but participation in these programs can be increased through efficient and cost-effective initiatives;
2. **Increase the Capacity of the Private Charitable Emergency Food Networks**: Oklahoma's private charitable emergency food network provides effective assistance to those in need and should be strengthened;
3. **Increase Family Economic Stability**: Through improvements to existing programs, particularly those involving tax credits, Oklahoma could improve the family economic security of its low-income citizens; and
4. **Strengthen Community Food Security**: Oklahoma has the resources to enhance community food security, the ability to grow and produce nutritious food for those in need, and we should take steps to build upon those resources.

Oklahoma's hunger problem is multi-faceted and a diverse set of organizations currently exist to offer preventive and emergency support to those facing the threat of hunger in our state. Although our goal of reducing food insecurity in Oklahoma to at or below the national average is a challenge, it is also a great opportunity. Though our current federal, state, and private sector programs aimed at these problems are fragmented across funding streams and administrative authority, with greater cooperation and coordination these programs can become increasingly effective at fighting food insecurity from a variety of vantage points. The Oklahoma Task Force on Hunger, by bringing together representatives from many of these different programs, represents a powerful step toward achieving the level of information sharing and coordination that is required. It is the Task Force's belief that this inter-agency collaboration and partnership should continue because "*Hunger is Not OK*".

INTRODUCTION

Food is life. Just as all human beings have a right to life, which is inherent and sacred, they also have a right to food, the fuel of life. The good society, one of both justice and mercy, is morally obligated to ensure that all of its members are fed. When some among us go hungry, regardless of the cause, their suffering is a stain on the fabric of our community. Whether in Oklahoma or elsewhere in the world, hunger rarely occurs because there is simply not enough food; rather, hunger occurs because families and individuals cannot afford to buy the food. The roots of Oklahoma's hunger problem are embedded in the plots of poverty amidst our pastures of plenty.

Oklahomans have long known and treasured the values of community and charity. When they know that someone's human needs are not being met, they do not hesitate to offer a helping hand. Each year, hundreds of thousands of Oklahomans, through public or private initiatives, take an active part in fighting the threats of hunger and privation that are visited upon their neighbors. By volunteering their time and energy, donating food and money to private charities, raising awareness among their friends and faith assemblies, and by embarking upon careers in public service, Oklahomans powerfully express the simple, yet profound belief that our society should strive to care for those who are suffering. Sadly, despite this outpouring of support and determined effort, Oklahoma still has far to go in achieving many of these goals. Prominent among these, our goal of eliminating hunger in Oklahoma is retreating from our grasp.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Oklahoma is one of the hungriest places in America. Although the national rate of food insecurity has remained steady at 11.3 percent over the past ten years, the percentage of Oklahoma's population classified as "food insecure" has risen from 13.1 percent to 14.6 percent. Only four states have a higher percentage of their population facing the threat of hunger. Over the past ten years, the percentage of our population that goes hungry each year, those classified as "food insecure with hunger" has risen from 4.2 percent to 5.3 percent, also placing us among the five worst states for that measure. This deterioration is particularly disturbing given the successes in service capacity and program participation achieved by both public and private entities over this same time frame.

Hunger- chronically inadequate nutritional intake or the uneasy and uncomfortable sensation caused by involuntary lack of food.
Food Insecurity- limited or uncertain access to a nutritionally adequate diet, characterized by skipped meals, reduced food portions and/or uncertainty of being able to adequately feed all household members.

In an effort to better understand Oklahoma's hunger problem, and to find workable solutions, the Oklahoma Task Force on Hunger was created and tasked with a number of aims, such as devising:

- Strategies for coordinating services among federal, state, faith-based and nonprofit organizations;
- Strategies for extending existing programs and outreach efforts to serve more people;
- Strategies to involve schools to identify and improve students access to sufficient and nutritious food;
- Strategies to connect eligible hungry people with existing programs;
- Recommendations for legislation to implement the findings of the task force.
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- Recommendations for legislation to implement the findings of the task force.

The Task Force concluded that, with the proper amount of political and community commitment, Oklahoma could dramatically increase the food security of its citizens in the near future. This belief is founded upon four major observations:

1. Many of our existing nutrition programs are under-utilized in Oklahoma
2. Oklahoma's private charitable emergency food network provides effective assistance to those in need and could be further strengthened
3. Through improvements to existing programs, Oklahoma could substantially improve the economic security of its low-income citizens
4. Oklahoma has a strong set of resources through which to enhance community food security

Currently, 20 states have food insecurity rates below 10 percent; the national average is 11.3 percent. Although, ultimately, the goal of the organizations serving on this Task Force is to eliminate hunger in Oklahoma, this goal will require many years of effort to achieve. Our immediate goal, though, is clear and obtainable.

Resolved: Oklahoma should aim to reduce its level of food insecurity at or below the current national average by 2013.

Oklahoma's Hunger Problem

Hunger Is an Income Issue

Among households living below the poverty line, 36.3% are classified as “food insecure” and 14.8% experience hunger. Among households with income at or below 185% of the federal poverty line, 27.3% are classified as “food insecure” and 10.7% experience hunger. Households with incomes above 185%, on the other hand, have a food insecurity rate of 5.3% and a hunger rate of 1.7%.ⁱ Above all else, the threat of hunger is faced by those with inadequate incomes.

Oklahoma's high rates of hunger and food insecurity are strongly connected to its unusually high poverty rate. Currently, 17% of Oklahomans live in poverty, placing us in a tie with Kentucky for the 7th worst poverty rate in the nation.ⁱⁱ This represents a substantial increase since 2000, when 13.8% of Oklahomans lived in poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ In Oklahoma, 24.3% of children live at or below the poverty line; children make up more than one-third of Oklahoma's population living in poverty. This also represents a substantial increase since 2000, when 18.4% of Oklahoma's children lived in poverty.

Sadly, the poverty line is not an accurate reflection of the size of Oklahoma's at-risk population; there are many families living above the poverty line who, nonetheless, face great instability and insecurity related to their inadequate incomes. For a single mother raising two children, the poverty line is set at an annual income of only \$16,242, which can, in many cases, be an income that is far from sufficient to provide adequate housing, healthcare, food, transportation, clothing, home heating and other basic necessities.^{iv} The poverty threshold for a senior living alone is only \$9,669. For many seniors, this income may barely be enough to pay for prescription drugs, housing, and utilities, much less an adequate supply of nutritious food. Even for those families who are able to cope with income near the poverty line, security is often far from a reality; household budgets are so tight that a major disruption, such as a medical emergency or job loss, can send them into financial crisis. The number of Oklahomans who could potentially fall into food insecurity at any given time is significantly larger than even our high poverty rate would suggest.

Most of the families facing food insecurity are composed of working adults, disabled individuals, retirees, and children. Households composed of able-bodied adults who are not in the work force are only a small proportion of the total number of families facing food insecurity. Even among those households who are experiencing hunger, classified as “very low food security,” less than 20 percent are classified by the USDA as either “unemployed, no employed” or “none in labor force, other.”^v More than one-third of households experiencing hunger are composed of disabled and/or retired persons, while the remaining 46 percent have working members. Very few of Oklahoma's food

insecure families are currently receiving welfare benefits from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF).

Why are working families experiencing hunger?

A person working full-time for the minimum wage (\$5.85 per hour) brings home an annual income of only \$12,168. In some very rare cases, this may be an adequate income for a household to meet its basic needs without outside assistance; in general, though, such wages fall very short of allowing an individual or family to be self-sufficient. In Oklahoma County in 2002, for instance, a single person with no dependents was estimated to need an hourly wage of \$7.52, with an annual income of \$15,877 from full-time employment, to be “self-sufficient” (capable of meeting basic needs without public assistance or private charity). In Tulsa County in 2002, a single parent with one pre-school age child was estimated to need an hourly wage of \$13.53, with an annual income of \$28,576, to be self-sufficient.^{vi} In the five years since Oklahoma’s self-sufficiency standard was evaluated, the costs required to meet basic needs have risen substantially and, when the self-sufficiency standard is re-evaluated, the wages required will be even higher.

The situation is, indeed, worsening. Many of Oklahoma’s working families are seeing their incomes become more and more inadequate, as the costs of basic necessities are rising faster and further beyond their wages. Adjusted for inflation, Oklahoma’s economy grew by 8.5 % between 2002 and 2005. Unfortunately, wages have not kept pace. Adjusted for inflation, the 2005 Oklahoma median wage (\$12.26) was slightly lower than the 2001 median wage. Adjusted for inflation, the median household income in Oklahoma fell by 4.1 % between 2001 and 2005.^{vii} The picture becomes even less hospitable when the differing rates of inflation for different income earners are taken into account. Because high-income earners have different consumption patterns than low-income earners, and because prices rise and fall at different rates for different goods, inflation rates do not necessarily affect all citizens equally. In recent years, inflation has risen sharply on the goods that low-income earners allocate a relatively larger percentage of their household budgets to consume than do higher income earners: utility costs, food, motor fuels, housing and healthcare. As a result, the

Rising Food Prices Increase Hunger Threat

- Through 2007, food prices have risen by an annual rate of 5.1%*
- Food prices are expected to continue to rise
- Because some federal food assistance programs, like The Emergency Food Assistance Program, are not indexed to inflation, program benefits have eroded as prices have risen.
- Rising food prices hurt the ability of Oklahoma’s charitable community to meet human needs
- Weakened food purchasing budgets
- Weakened supply of donated food

** Calculated from Consumer Price Indices from Jan. 2007 to Aug. 2007, based on CPI Data released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.*

<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cpi.pdf>

cost of living has risen much more rapidly for low-income families than it has for other families. When inflation rates are disaggregated and applied to income groups according to their consumption patterns, it is evident that low-income Americans have actually been in a recession for the past decade, as their wages have not risen at the same pace as the cost of living.^{viii} The rapidly rising cost of basic necessities is increasingly putting Oklahoma's families at risk of hunger and food insecurity, as it becomes more likely that they will have to choose between buying food and paying for other basic necessities. Among people served by the Oklahoma Food Bank system, for instance, 41% report having to choose between buying food or paying for their utilities and heating fuel; 32% report having to choose between buying food and paying their rent or mortgage bill. The rapid rise in food and fuel prices, in particular, is forcing more Oklahomans to make these kinds of harsh choices.

Due to changes at the federal level, the minimum wage received by Oklahoma's workers is set to rise to \$6.55 an hour on July 24, 2008 and 7.25 an hour on July 24, 2009. Although this wage will still be far from sufficient to allow many of Oklahoma's families to live without public subsidies and private charity, it is a positive step in the direction toward self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, as has historically been the case, the values of these wage increases are already being eroded by the inflation in basic goods.

Hunger Targets Children

Among those facing the threat of hunger, children are disproportionately at risk. Nationwide, 18% of children live in food insecure households; in Oklahoma, more than 22% of children live in food insecure households.^{ix} Even amongst children, the threat is disproportionately focused on the youngest. In Oklahoma, 28.7% of children below the age of five live in poverty; among children between the ages of 16 and 18, the percentage falls to 20.5%.^x Proper nutrition is imperative for children; the lack of an adequate and nutritious diet can irreversibly affect a child's growth and development, disadvantaging them for a lifetime.

Effects of Food Insecurity on Children

- Low birth weight
- Increased hospitalizations
- Anemia
- Obesity
 - *Lower quality food consumption*
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Irritability and inability to concentrate
- Increased school absence
- Lower educational achievement

One in five children in Oklahoma is at risk of being hungry. In the Oklahoma City Public School System, nearly 87% of students qualify for the free and reduced meal program. While these students are provided with meals during school, many of them do not have access to adequate nutritious food over weekends and holidays.

Unfortunately, for many children hunger isn't just an occasional missed meal, it is a way of life. Children who live with hunger develop physically and socially at a slower pace than their peers. Chronically hungry children experience higher levels of anxiety, hyperactivity, irritability and aggression. The combination of the hunger-related issues results in students with lower attendance rates at school and lower academic performance.

Hunger destroys childhoods and can cause life-long impairments. Chronically hungry children have shorter attention spans in school and are unable to perform tasks at the same level as their peers. They are more susceptible to illness and therefore more frequently absent from school. Poor performance early in school is one of the chief risk factors for dropping-out of school in later years. Nutritional deprivation prevents elementary age children from performing at their full potential and often forces them back into a cycle of poverty as adults.

Hunger Is Hard On the Elderly

Senior citizens who are food insecure face especially large risks, as well as barriers to obtaining assistance. Hunger increases their risk for stroke, exacerbates pre-existing ill health conditions, limits the effectiveness of many prescription drugs and may affect brain chemistry increasing the incidence of depression and isolation. Research suggests that insufficient nutrient intake accounts for a disproportionate amount of health care costs among low-income elderly individuals, unrelated to the aging process. Unfortunately, senior citizens face many unique barriers in obtaining adequate nutrition assistance:

- Those with limited mobility often have difficulty shopping for food, applying for Federal Food Stamp assistance or seeking help at local food pantries. They may also have difficulty in preparing meals for themselves.
- The rising costs of prescription drugs and medical care weigh disproportionately on senior citizens, compromising their food budgets in the process. The countervailing burdens of food and medicine can often play a large role in pushing individuals into food insecurity. For instance, of those who receive food through the Oklahoma Food Bank network, 32% report having to choose between buying food or paying for medicine or medical care.
- The process of applying for federal food assistance can be especially difficult for seniors. The complexity of the application forms, as well as the eligibility formula itself, can serve to hinder their ability to be food secure. Historically, no more than one-third of eligible elderly in the United States have participated in the Food Stamp Program—a participation rate far lower than that of any other major demographic group.^{xi}

- Between 2000 and 2030, Oklahoma’s senior population is expected to grow by nearly 67%.^{xii} Unless serious effort is put into improving nutrition services for them, Oklahoma may see a dramatic rise in the number of senior citizens, many with special needs, struggling with hunger.

Hunger Harms Rural Oklahoma

Hunger is often assumed to be an urban problem. In reality, rates of both food insecurity and hunger are significantly higher in non-metropolitan areas.^{xiii} Rural areas typically have lower median incomes, higher poverty rates, and weaker wage growth than metropolitan areas. Moreover, access to food supplies is often more limited in rural areas:

- Rural residents often live far from grocery stores. 32 of Oklahoma’s 77 counties are classified as “food deserts,” meaning that at least 25% of their population lives ten miles or more from a supermarket or supercenter. Nine of those counties are “severe food deserts,” meaning that the entire population has limited access to such food outlets (Cimarron, Dewey, Ellis, Grant, Greer, Harmon, Harper, Hughes and Jefferson counties). All of these food desert counties are non-metropolitan.^{xiv}
- Access to emergency food assistance is also limited in many rural areas. Unlike Oklahoma’s metropolitan areas, which have substantial numbers of private, charitable emergency food assistance sites, rural Oklahoma has a much lower concentration of such services.
- Rural Oklahoma’s population consists of a substantially higher percentage of senior citizens than the state’s metropolitan population.^{xv} Limited mobility, combined with the restricted access to food supplies, pose great difficulties for food insecure senior citizens in rural Oklahoma.

Hunger Has Large Economic Costs

Hunger carries with it not just profound human costs, but also serious economic costs. Hunger decreases children’s ability to grow and learn, undercutting their potential in their future careers. Hunger causes health and social effects that decrease productivity in adult workers. Hunger leads to increased health costs for people of all ages. In June 2007, the Sodexo Foundation, in collaboration with public health researchers from Harvard University, Brandeis University and Loyola University, released the report “The Economic Cost of Domestic Hunger.” Based on the available evidence, the report concludes that hunger costs American citizens \$90 billion each year, at a minimum. This estimate does not include tax monies spent on nutrition and anti-hunger programs. The authors estimate that Oklahoma alone loses more than \$1.4 billion each year from hunger, through illness increased illness and decreased academic achievement alone.^{xvi} If lost worker productivity and other costs were included, the total economic cost would be even higher than this estimate suggests.

The Link between Hunger and Obesity

A number of recent studies have shown that people in food-insecure households are more likely to be obese than people in food-secure households.^{xviiixviii} The combination of obesity with hunger is a curious phenomenon that the public and policymakers are only now beginning to understand. There are a number of reasons that low-income families can suffer from both hunger and obesity at the same time. In fact, it seems that food insecurity is not simply a correlate of obesity; it is also one of the many *causes* of obesity.

- ***When households have a limited budget with which to purchase food, research has shown that they tend to reduce the quality and variety of the food purchased before they will reduce the quantity.^{xix} Likewise, low-income families also tend to stretch their food budgets by maximizing the “calories per dollar” of the foods they purchase.^{xx}*** In order to stretch their food budgets, and ensure that household members do not experience the gnawing pains of hunger, food-insecure households tend to replace high cost and low calorie items like fresh produce, fish and lean meats with cheap, high carbohydrate items like pasta, bread, soft drinks and junk food. Though such food items are not healthy as primary diet items, they are cheap and filling. In an increasing number of cases, low-income families are also turning to deep-discount stores, which often do not carry fresh produce and other more healthy food items, for many of their grocery needs.
- ***Obesity and overeating can be an adaptive response to feelings of hunger. Research has indicated that chronic fluctuations in food availability can cause people to overeat when food is available.^{xxi} Furthermore, when the body experiences periods of food deprivation, it can compensate by storing more calories as fat, creating a reserve to sustain the body through times when food is not available.^{xxii}*** The human body and mind have built-in responses to food deprivation. When food is not available and a person begins to experience hunger, the body can respond in an attempt to create and store caloric reserves, for use in future periods of deprivation. This “feast or famine” dynamic has surely served us well throughout most of human history, but in contemporary America, where starvation is rarely a threat, it is less useful and can lead food-insecure individuals into an obesity trap.

EXISTING ANTI-HUNGER PROGRAMS

Food Stamp Program (FSP)

The Food Stamp Program is our nation's first line of defense against hunger. Each month, the program provides assistance to more than 26 million people nationwide, enabling them to purchase the food necessary for a healthy and productive life. For many families, the Food Stamp Program is a lifeline, a support just as crucial as Social Security is to the elderly. Nationwide, more than half of the people served by the Food Stamp Program are children and more than three quarters of the total program funding goes to households with children. Over the course of a year, the Food Stamp Program brings more than \$467 million in assistance to vulnerable families in Oklahoma, strengthening both family food budgets and local economies.

The Food Stamp program has transitioned to the use of electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards in lieu of the traditional paper coupons. The EBT cards, which can be used like debit cards at food retailers, make the program more convenient for program clients, while at the same time largely eliminating the possibility for fraud. FSP benefits can only be used to purchase food, beverages and food-producing seeds or plants; they cannot be used to purchase non-food items, hot foods or foods prepared for in-store consumption.

Food Stamp Program benefits are based on the "Thrifty Food Plan," which is the USDA's estimate of what it would cost to purchase particular types and amounts of food representing a minimally adequate diet. In determining benefits, the FSP assumes that clients can spend about 30% of their income on food; the program covers the gap between that amount and the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan. In Oklahoma, the average FSP benefit is about \$90 per person. In addition to protecting families from hunger, the Food Stamp Program provides strong support for local economies; the USDA estimates that for every \$5 in Food Stamp benefits that flow into a community, total economic activity is increased by \$9.20.^{xxiii} If Oklahoma were to raise its participation rate by an additional 5%, our state could see an increase in economic activity worth more than \$23 million per year.^{xxiv}

Oklahoma has been nationally recognized for its success in increasing participation in the Food Stamp Program. In federal fiscal year 2002, an average of 316,809 Oklahomans participated monthly in the Food Stamp Program. In federal fiscal year 2006, an average of 434,211 Oklahomans participated monthly, representing 75% of those eligible to participate in the program. Nationwide, the USDA estimates that only 60% of those eligible for the program actually participate. Despite Oklahoma's success in outreach relative to other states, there is still much that can be done to increase program participation in Oklahoma.

Women, Infants and Children program (WIC)

Established as a pilot program in 1972 and made permanent in 1974, WIC is administered at the Federal level by the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Formerly known as the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children, WIC's name was changed under the Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act of 1994, in order to emphasize its role as a nutrition program. WIC provides Federal grants to States for nutrition education, supplemental foods and health care referrals for the low-income and nutritionally at risk WIC target population:

- Pregnant women (through pregnancy and up to 6 weeks after birth or after pregnancy ends)
- Breastfeeding women (up to infant's 1st birthday)
- Non-breastfeeding postpartum women (up to 6 months after the birth of an infant or after pregnancy ends)
- Infants (up to 1st birthday). WIC serves 45 percent of all infants born in the United States. Oklahoma State Department of Health WIC serves 51 percent of all infants born in Oklahoma.
- Children up to their 5th birthday.

Most State WIC programs provide vouchers that participants use at authorized food stores. A wide variety of State and local organizations cooperate in providing the food and health care benefits, and 46,000 merchants nationwide accept WIC vouchers. Oklahoma has 525 merchants who accept WIC vouchers.

WIC is effective in saving lives and improving the health of nutritionally at-risk women, infants and children. The results of studies conducted by FNS and other non-government entities prove that WIC is one of the nation's most successful and cost-effective nutrition intervention programs. A 1990 study showed that women who participated in the program during their pregnancies had lower Medicaid costs for themselves and their babies than did women who did not participate. WIC participation was also linked with longer gestation periods, higher birth weights and lower infant mortality.

In Federal Fiscal Year 2007, Oklahoma State Department of Health WIC Service had an average monthly caseload of 94,740 with 128 clinics statewide. In addition, Oklahoma has nine Indian Tribal Organizations with a total monthly caseload of 25,000. The national WIC monthly caseload is approximately 8.54 million. The average monthly benefit in Oklahoma is \$56.64 per person.

Collective findings of studies, reviews and reports demonstrate that WIC participation has been shown to cause the following outcomes:

- Improved growth rates
- Reduced fetal mortality and infant mortality
- Reduced low birth weight rates and increases in the duration of pregnancy
- Significantly improved children's diets
- Improved growth of nutritionally at-risk infants and children
- Decreased incidence of iron deficiency anemia in children
- Improved dietary intake of pregnant and postpartum women and improved weight gain in pregnant women
- Pregnant women participating in WIC receive prenatal care earlier
- Children enrolled in WIC are more likely to have a regular source of medical care and have more up to date immunizations
- Helps get children ready to start school: children who receive WIC benefits demonstrate improved intellectual development

Benefits of Breastfeeding

Human milk is the best infant nutrition for the first year of life and beyond with the introduction of solid foods at the appropriate age.

Infants fed human milk receive multiple health, nutritional, environmental and economic benefits compared to infants fed artificial baby milk (formula).

Human milk helps infants grow and mature properly, especially in the first year of life when the brain doubles in size. Human milk has over 200 constituents, most not duplicated in artificial baby milk, and provides immunological protection against a variety of illnesses. Unlike artificial baby milk, human milk changes in composition to meet the growing infant's nutritional needs.

Conversely, research shows that non-breastfed infants are less healthy. These babies experience more frequent infections including otitis media, pneumonia, diarrhea, meningitis, urinary tract infection and necrotizing enterocolitis. Studies have shown that infants not breastfed are at increased risk for childhood-onset diabetes mellitus, obesity, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, childhood cancers like lymphoma and leukemia and intestinal diseases such as Celiac Disease and Chron's Disease. Additional risks of not breastfeeding are increased incidence of asthma, allergies, multiple sclerosis, respiratory syncytial virus and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Nursing mothers also experience health benefits. Breastfeeding stimulates the uterus to contract, reducing postpartum bleeding; delays ovulation; and may help mothers return to their pre-pregnancy weight more readily. Research studies show that mothers who breastfeed have lower incidence of osteoporosis and breast, uterine and ovarian cancers. Breastfeeding also promotes bonding because of the hormones released during skin-to-skin contact.

Breastfeeding offers multiple economic and environmental benefits as well. A minimum of \$3.6 billion dollars a year would be saved in healthcare costs if breastfeeding increased from current levels (64% in hospital and 29% at 6 months) to those recommended by the U.S. Surgeon General (75% and 50% respectively). Parents of breastfed babies miss fewer days of work due to illness, thus benefiting their employers and, subsequently, the economy. Artificial baby milk costs \$1,000 or more for a year's supply with the additional burden of the nation and community bearing the environmental cost of its production and disposal.

Source: *Breastfeeding Promotion and Support in the WIC Program Position Paper (2004)*

Senior Food programs (Area Agencies on Aging)

Established in 1965 as The Older Americans Act, OAA is administered at the Federal level by the Department of Health and Human Services and The Administration on Aging (AOA). The Administration on Aging with the Older Americans Act – Title III aims to provide services to:

- reduce hunger and food insecurity
- promote socialization of older individuals
- promote the health and well-being of older individuals by assisting such individuals to gain access to nutrition and other disease prevention and health promotion services to delay the onset of adverse conditions resulting from poor nutritional health or sedentary behavior.

These goals are served through congregate sites and home delivered meals. These sites also provide the Advantage waiver clients their home delivered meals.

In the Federal Fiscal Year 2007, OKDHS Division on Aging served 2,161,419 congregate meals, 1,876,743 home delivered meals and 2,249,381 Advantage home delivered meals. With increasing costs and an increasing number of senior citizens we are looking at ways to do more with what we have, such as initiating the Senior Farmers Market program in our state and offering a prime vendor option so that group purchasing power may lower food costs as the state has done in other facilities.

In accordance with Oklahoma Department of Commerce's (ODOC) annual appropriations bill, Oklahoma Senate Bill 1017 Sections 1 and 6, the Office of Community Development (OCD) issued a Request for Applications for funding under the Community Expansion of Nutrition Assistance (CENA) Program. The allocation of \$2,850,000 was awarded to Councils of Government and Area Agencies on Aging administering senior independent sites and Title III-Multi-Purpose nutrition sites.

The funds were used to enhance nutritional needs of senior citizens through the purchase of food, insurance, payment of utilities, maintenance and purchase of equipment, transportation, and food preparation.

School Nutrition Programs

National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

The National School Lunch Act, passed in 1946, established school lunch programs across the nation. The purpose of the program was to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children and to encourage the consumption of agricultural abundance.

The National School Lunch Program is available to any public or private nonprofit school or licensed

residential child care institution. The objectives of the National School Lunch Program are to make available to all students enrolled in schools and institutions a meal during a period designated as the lunch period; to provide nutritionally adequate meals that are acceptable to students, thus reducing plate waste; to provide assistance to participants to ensure that minimum meal requirements are met; and to ensure that all programs are accountable. School districts and residential child care institutions may receive reimbursement for lunches served to enrolled students at predetermined rates established for free, reduced-price, or full-price meals each fiscal year.

In 1995, the federal government implemented regulations that require all school lunches and breakfasts to be consistent with the recommendation for the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. This rule established specific minimum standards for calories and key nutrients that meals must meet.

In Oklahoma, on average, 394,828 students participate in the School Lunch Program each day.

School Breakfast Program (SBP)

Established by federal legislation in 1966, the School Breakfast Program received permanent authorization in 1975. The purpose of this program is to make breakfast available for students who, for various reasons, come to school without an adequate breakfast.

As with the National School Lunch Program, any public or private nonprofit school or licensed residential child care institution is eligible to benefit from the School Breakfast Program. School districts and residential child care institutions may receive reimbursement for breakfasts served to enrolled students at predetermined rates established for free, reduced-price or full-price meals each fiscal year. Districts and residential child care institutions that serve 40 percent or more of its lunches to free or reduced-price students in the second preceding year, receive an additional \$.26 per free and reduced-price breakfast served.

In Oklahoma, on average, 180,352 students participate in the School Breakfast Program each day.

After-School Snack Program (ASSP)

The After-School Snack Program was created to provide after-school snacks to children who participate in an organized after-school enrichment or educational program. The after-school program must provide children with regularly scheduled activities in a structured and supervised setting and must be run by a school that is operating the National School Lunch Program.

Schools participating in the After-School Snack Program may claim reimbursement for one snack per child per day for participating children enrolled in public school. A qualifying after-school program located in an attendance area of a school site in which at least 50 percent of the enrolled students are certified for free or reduced-price meals may receive reimbursement for snacks served to students at the free rate. A qualifying after-school program located in an attendance area that does not meet the 50 percent free and reduce-price criteria may receive reimbursement for snacks served to students at the free, reduced-price or full-price rates established each new fiscal year.

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)

While learning does not end when school lets out, neither does the need for good nutrition. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is good nutritious food that's "in" when school is "out." It was created to ensure that children, aged 1 through 18, in low-income areas could continue to receive nutritious meals during long school vacations, when they do not have access to school lunch or breakfast.

Sponsors must be organizations that are fully capable of managing a food service program. Eligible organizations include:

- public or private nonprofit schools
- units of local, municipal, county, tribal or state government
- private nonprofit organizations
- public or private nonprofit camps
- public or private nonprofit universities or colleges

The SFSP sponsor must have at least one physical location (site), approved by the State agency, where SFSP meals are served during a supervised time period. There are six types of sites:

- **open** (at least half the children in the area are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals)
- **enrolled** (at least half the children enrolled in the program are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals)
- **camp** (offers a regularly scheduled food service as part of a residential or day camp program)
- **migrant** (primarily serves children of migrant workers)
- **NYSP** (a college or university participating in the National Youth Sports Program).

In Oklahoma, the average daily participation rate in June is 27,172, but drops to less than 15,000 in the month of July. One of the primary reasons for this decline is because most of the sites are school sponsored. School sponsors participate in the month of June because this is the month in which they have organized enrichment programs and summer school. Schools that participate in July have stated

they see a dramatic decline in children coming to the sites. Oklahoma is ranked second to last among states in terms of the low-income student participation rate in this program.^{xxv} In 2001, the USDA selected Oklahoma, along with 13 other states, to participate in the “Simplified Summer Food Program,” commonly known as the Lugar Pilot. Under this program, SFSP sponsors are reimbursed at the maximum allowable rate and are no longer required to report costs to receive reimbursement, nor are they required to segregate operational and administrative costs. As a result, Oklahoma’s rate of participation, though still very low, has increased at a faster rate than most other states.

Special Milk Program (SMP)

In 1954, the Special Milk Program was implemented to encourage fluid milk consumption by selling milk to students at the lowest possible price and serving milk free to students determined to be eligible. Beginning in 1981 and continuing through 1986, this program was available only to schools and nonprofit child care institutions not participating in the National School Lunch and/or School Breakfast Programs. In 1986, the Special Milk Program was expanded to include split-session kindergarten children who do not have access to the breakfast and/or lunch programs because of their half-day schedules. The benefits of the program were also extended to preprimary class students who do not have access to the breakfast and/or lunch program because of their half-day schedules.

School districts which have split-session kindergarten and preprimary students who do not have access to the National School Lunch and/or School Breakfast Programs may receive reimbursement for milk served to these students. Schools may choose either to serve milk free to students qualifying according to family income, serve milk at a set price to all students or serve milk free to all students.

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

The Special Food Service Program for Children, established by Congress in 1968, was the forerunner of the Child Care Food Program. Further legislation in 1975, 1978, 1981, and 1987 clarified, expanded and made permanent the Child Care Food Program. The title was changed in 1989 to the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

Child care centers, adult day care centers, Head Start programs, family day care homes and emergency shelters may participate in the CACFP. Eligible institutions include settlement houses, day care centers, organizations providing day care services for disabled individuals and/or adults 60 years of age or older and outside-school-hours care centers. Organizations eligible to sponsor a CACFP include units of state or local government; nonprofit private organizations such as community action agencies and churches; and private for-profit organizations sponsoring Title XX and Title XIX centers which

receive Title XX and Title XIX compensation for at least 25 percent of the participants enrolled or 25 percent of license capacity, whichever is less.

Two types of assistance are available through the CACFP. The first of these—cash reimbursement—is available for meals and/or supplements meeting the United States Department of Agriculture meal pattern requirements, but not exceeding three meals per day per child. The second type of assistance available through the program is in the form of commodities donated by the United States Department of Agriculture. Commodities are made available to eligible participating agencies through the Oklahoma Department of Human Services Food and Nutrition Service Unit.

Private Charitable Food Assistance Programs

In addition to the food assistance programs operated under the auspices of the USDA, Oklahoma also benefits from a large and diverse number of private charitable programs offering food assistance to vulnerable Oklahomans. Non-profit and faith-based organizations operate private charitable programs such as:

- Food pantries
- Soup kitchens
- After-school programs
- At-risk youth programs
- Homeless shelters
- Domestic violence shelters

In Oklahoma, the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma and the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma serve as the primary food supply conduits for the state’s charitable community, providing surplus, recovered, donated foods and grocery items to over 900 member faith-based organizations and charitable feeding programs, including food pantries, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and other food assistance organizations. More than three-quarters of the organizations served are faith-based; most of the organizations are run exclusively by volunteers. In total, the two food banks provide more than 34 million pounds of food to Oklahoma’s charitable community yearly. Currently, over 75,000 people each week receive emergency food assistance through the Food Bank system; an estimated 10% of Oklahoma’s population is served by the Food Bank system each year.

Oklahoma’s charitable community is a crucial source of food assistance for vulnerable Oklahomans. Although government-funded food programs do much to provide low-income families with the food they need, they are often not a fully adequate source of assistance. Many of those who are in need of

food assistance do not qualify for the Food Stamp Program and other USDA-funded food assistance programs. This is especially true of specific populations, like senior citizens and legal immigrants. Many of those who do participate in such programs do not receive benefits that are adequate to meet their needs. Of the people served by the Oklahoma Food Bank system, only 36% participate in the Food Stamp Program; those who do participate in the FSP report that their monthly benefits, on average, are exhausted after only two weeks.^{xxvi} The average household income among families receiving emergency food assistance through Oklahoma Food Bank network is only \$10,200. OKDHS contracts with Oklahoma's food banks to distribute food commodities supplied by The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Under the Emergency Food Assistance Program, the USDA buys food commodities, processes and packages them and ships them to distributing organizations, usually food banks, in the various states. In Oklahoma, the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma and the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma are responsible for distributing TEFAP commodities to more than 550 emergency feeding programs across the state. For many emergency feeding programs, the TEFAP program is the main source of nutritious food. Unfortunately, inadequate funding in recent years for TEFAP has created a shortfall of 33 million pounds in available food to Oklahoma's charitable community over the last five years. The shortfall in the current fiscal year is expected to be 10 million pounds, representing enough food for over 7.8 million meals. The TEFAP program has two components:

- The TEFAP program makes mandatory purchases in the amount of \$140 million each year
- The TEFAP program purchases "bonus" commodities as a price support to the agricultural sector. Because of the rise in food prices in recent years, USDA has dramatically reduced its purchase of "bonus" commodities and, as a consequence, the flow of such food supplies to the nation's charitable community has weakened substantially.

The decline in TEFAP commodities to Oklahoma's charitable community has weakened our state's emergency food safety net. In response to declining supplies from the program, many charitable feeding programs have been forced to reduce operational hours, reduce amounts distributed to families or simply close their doors. In this time of rising need for food assistance, it is imperative that this dynamic be reversed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase Participation in Underutilized Federal Food Programs

The Food Stamp Program, School Nutrition Programs, and the WIC program are Oklahoma's primary bulwarks against the threat of hunger to our children and families. Unfortunately, many of those who would benefit from these services do not participate. Although Oklahoma has one of the highest rates of participation in the Food Stamp Program, a quarter of those who are eligible do not participate. Although the School Lunch Program has a high participation rate and is effective at providing nutrition for children, participation in the School Breakfast Program is very low. Although participation in the WIC program is generally high in Oklahoma, only 54% of households with pre-school children served by the Oklahoma Food Bank network participate in the program. During the summer months, when school meals are not available, only a small minority of students participate in the Summer Feeding Program. In order to decrease the incidence of hunger and food insecurity in Oklahoma, it is essential that participation in federal food programs be significantly increased.

1. Increase public knowledge of criteria and benefits of USDA-FNS food assistance programs

Perhaps the largest reason why individuals and families do not participate in programs like the Food Stamp Program and other Federal Food Programs is a lack of knowledge about them: eligible non-participants do not realize that they would qualify nor do they understand the benefits of the programs.^{xxvii} In order to raise awareness of both program benefits and eligibility, Oklahoma should:

- Work to educate both public agencies and private, charitable food programs that serve Oklahomans about the available federal food programs, their benefits and eligibility requirements, as well as providing them with a wide range of outreach materials to distribute to those they serve.
- Seek funding for additional Public Service Announcements and other awareness building activities for use in print, radio, and television media.
- Develop and distribute a newsletter (in hard copy and electronic format) containing resources which describe food assistance programs, contact information, and nutrition facts.
- Develop a tool box of practical ideas to help Oklahomans stretch their food dollars, including information about federal food programs
- Seek ways to spread knowledge of the Food Stamp Program's online Pre-Screening Eligibility Tool, available on the FNS website

2. Increase the number of Frontline workers for food stamp applications

In state fiscal year 2007, 633,468 individuals received food stamp benefits. An average of over 400,000 individuals are eligible on a monthly basis. Food stamp cases have risen 66% from 2000 to 2006 with no substantial change in the number of workers over that period. Even with those figures, Oklahoma is one of the highest states in the nation for food stamp participation at 77%. In recognition of the increasing number of working families in need of food and other social supports and the desire to increase outreach efforts, the task force recommends the legislature support the OKDHS fiscal year 2008 funding request for additional family support front line workers to augment efforts in identifying and assisting low-income families in the state.

3. Launch pilot programs to explore ways to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program

For children in food insecure households, school meal programs often serve as the best protection against hunger. Unfortunately, although participation in the school lunch program is high, especially for younger students, participation in the school breakfast program is unacceptably low. In Oklahoma, the average daily participation in the school breakfast program is only 28%. Increasing participation in the school breakfast program would not only decrease the threat of nutritional inadequacy for children, it would also support enhanced educational and behavioral outcomes by decreasing the emotional and physiological distractions that come from temporary and chronic feelings of hunger.

Why is breakfast participation so low?

- **Children often do not make it to school early enough to eat breakfast.** Typically, school breakfast is served in the cafeteria prior to the start of the school day. All too often, whether students ride the bus, are driven to school by their parents or walk/bike to school on their own, they do not arrive at school early enough to go through the breakfast line. This is the largest obstacle to participation in the School Breakfast Program.
- **School breakfast can carry a stigma for students.** For various reasons, students don't necessarily think the program is "cool." The obstacle often lies with the perception that school breakfast is for students of limited means. For some context, in Oklahoma, more than 80% of the students eating breakfast in the cafeteria are students who are eligible for free or reduced meals; among those, almost 90% are students who are eligible for free meals.^{xxviii} In that sense, the school breakfast program, in its traditional form, can sometimes constitute a visible dividing line between needy students and their schoolmates. As a result, students may feel negative social pressure which can encourage them to not participate in the program, even if they are hungry.

How can we overcome these obstacles?

Both of the obstacles mentioned above can be eliminated. In a number of states, schools have begun to experiment and move forward with in-classroom breakfasts that are free to all students. School districts can implement universal meal programs while receiving federal reimbursement based upon

the number of students eligible for free, reduced-priced and paid meals. Additional funding is necessary to implement such programs. The Maryland Meals for Achievement Program offers many insights into the value and feasibility of universal, in-classroom breakfast programs: (It should be noted that any school can offer breakfast free of charge to its students without the complications of participating in Provision 2 or 3. In fact, Alabama continued to serve students free but dropped the provision participation, because under the provision the district was not receiving the *maximum* allowable reimbursement.)

Maryland Meals for Achievement: A model for school breakfast

In the fall of 1998, the Maryland State Department of Education launched a research-based pilot program in six schools across the state. Under the pilot program, these six schools took advantage of Provision 2 and Provision 3 to begin offering universal, in-classroom school breakfast to all students. The state covered the funding gap between the federal reimbursements and the total cost. In collaboration with researchers from Harvard Medical School, the State Department of Education and the participating schools tracked student performance and stakeholder perceptions of the program to assess the impact of the pilot program.^{xxix} Among the many positive results of the program:

- Although, statewide, Maryland's school breakfast programs have an average daily participation rate of 11%, schools that participate in the MMFA program have an average daily participation rate of 72%. In some MMFA schools, daily participation has climbed to more than 90%.
- Tardiness declined by 8% in MMFA Schools. Suspensions decreased from an average of 4.4 days/month to 2.8 days/month.
- In MMFA schools, the percentage of students scoring at or above the satisfactory level on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program test improved by a full five points, on average. In the schools used for study comparisons, there was little or no change in test performance.
- 91% of school staff surveyed said the program should continue in their school. An overwhelming majority of staff surveyed reported that the program had improved the school's learning environment, improved student behavior and improved student attentiveness.
- 99% of parents who responded to the survey indicated that the program had helped their family.
- 81% of students surveyed reported that they liked classroom breakfast.

Based on the results of the pilot program, the Governor of Maryland and the Maryland General Assembly have repeatedly increased funding for the program, allowing it to expand to more schools. During the 2006-2007 school year, the program had a budget of \$3.1 million, which allowed 184 schools (serving almost 77,000 students) to participate in the program. In other words, it costs the MMFA program roughly \$40, on average, to provide free school breakfast to each child. With

additional funding in the future, the program could also serve the dozens of schools currently on the waiting list.

The total values of federal reimbursements for the program and the amount of additional state funding necessary are based upon the number of students eligible for free or reduced meals. For those students who are eligible for free meals, federal reimbursements cover 100% of reimbursable cost; the program funding pays nothing. For each student at a participating school who is eligible for reduced meals, the program funding pays 30 cents per day. For those students who are not eligible for free or reduced meals, the program funding pays \$1.50 per day. This does not necessarily cover the total cost of the meals for all schools; such costs vary depending upon the school district. Because of this, it is important that the program is voluntary. Under Maryland state law, schools must have at least 40% of their students eligible for free or reduced meals to be eligible for the program.

In launching a similar pilot program in Oklahoma, we could maximize the amount of funding that would come through leveraged federal funds by selecting schools with higher rates of eligibility for free and reduced meals. By selecting schools with eligibility rates for free/reduced meals at 70% or higher, we could stretch the funding for a pilot program while also targeting schools that are most likely to experience substantial problems with hunger and food insecurity. Initially, the funding for this kind of pilot program does not necessarily have to be provided by the state government. Private groups like Share Our Strength and the “Got Breakfast?” Coalition currently provide grant funding for schools to implement universal, in-classroom breakfast programs. It may be possible for Oklahoma to secure similar grant funding from in-state and/or national groups to conduct a breakfast pilot program.

If such a program were implemented, it would be necessary to secure the involvement of education and/or public health researchers to track the impact of the program. With a strong research component, clear decisions can be made about the value and future of the program.

4. Explore methods to increase participation in the Summer Food Service Program

Because Oklahoma is included in the Lugar Pilot, explained above, it has become much easier for organizations to become and remain SFSP sponsors. As a result, Oklahoma has an increased ability to recruit new sponsors; our work on that front will play the largest role in increasing participation in the SFSP. In many cases, though, transportation to and from SFSP sites serves as a primary barrier to participation. Unlike during the school year, when buses are available to transport children to and from school, where they receive school meals, such transportation services are not usually available for children who would like to participate in the SFSP program. In some cases, it may be feasible to

provide grant funding for transportation expenses; in other cases, it may be more effective to provide grant funding for other program expenses.

5. Advocate for providing a variety of nutritious food options.

In order to ensure that Oklahoma's families have access to a diet that is nutritionally adequate, with significant consumption of fruits, vegetables and other healthy food choices, Oklahoma's food assistance programs should:

- Strengthen collaborations and combine resources to offer Nutrition Education training on DHHS Dietary Guidelines for Americans and USDA MyPyramid Guidelines for Anti-Hunger Program staff. Suggested providers: Food Stamp, WIC, Senior Food and School Nutrition Programs.
- Implement participant education campaigns that include materials related to shopping for, purchasing and cooking healthy foods, as well as providing nutrition facts, information, pamphlets, recipes, program information and outreach materials to nutrition assistance recipients.
- Encourage partnerships and collaborative interventions between the nutrition assistance programs and other related groups such as public health programs, healthcare providers, schools, faith-based groups and other community organizations encouraging the consumption of at least five fruits and vegetables a day.
- Promote "Oklahoma Grown" products statewide through recipe cards, media tours and nutrition education at and to farmers' markets. Work collaboratively to ensure national, state and local nutrition-related initiatives to promote fruit and vegetable consumption. Distribute nutrition education materials that emphasize the importance of eating the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables, as well as tips for parents to increase fruit and vegetable consumption in their families' eating patterns.
- Encourage vegetable intake by Oklahomans through a coordinated VEGETABLE campaign with particular emphasis on locally grown produce, featuring materials to cover nutrition and health benefits, growing, market selection, preparation and educational activities. These free materials could include newsletter inserts, bookmarks, flyers, table tents, recipes, shopping guides and more.

Increase the Capacity of the Private Charitable Emergency Food Network

Oklahoma's charitable community is a crucial component in securing community food security and preventing hunger among Oklahoma's population. Unfortunately, despite tremendous growth in the number of charitable organizations operating in Oklahoma and the services they can provide, the gap between the unmet food needs of Oklahoma's vulnerable families and the capacity of the charitable community to meet those needs is still very wide. As a result, many food insecure Oklahomans are

forced to make difficult choices about which of their basic human needs must suffer so that they can balance their household budgets.

1. Secure funding to increase the capacity of Oklahoma's Food Bank system

Oklahoma's food banks are the primary source of food supplies to Oklahoma's charitable community, in every Oklahoma county, distributing more than 34 million pounds of food yearly to more than 900 charitable organizations across the state. The need for this food assistance continues to rise and Oklahoma's charitable community bears active witness to this sad trend; the number of families seeking assistance, and their depth of their unmet needs, is rising faster than the ability of private organizations to provide for them. Due to high food prices, the amount of food supplied by both the federal government and the private sector is weakening at precisely the same time that the need for them is the greatest. Furthermore, operating expenses for the Oklahoma Food Bank network have increased dramatically in recent years, driving up the cost of food distribution.

- Food purchase costs have increased an average of 4%
- Inbound freight costs are up on average 73%
- Diesel fuel costs have increased 87%.

In order to strengthen the capacity of the Food Bank network to provide food for Oklahoma's hungry and food insecure families, the state of Oklahoma should explore ways to partner with Oklahoma's Food Bank network to secure funding for food purchases, distribution costs and programs. Funding for the Oklahoma Food Bank Network would:

- Allow the Oklahoma Food Bank network to provide more food, including more self-stable items, protein items such as milk, eggs and chicken as well as additional fresh fruits and vegetables that are limited in traditional donated food channels
- Allow emergency food programs receiving food from Oklahoma's food banks to serve more people and/or increase the amount of food given to a family
- Help defray the freight costs of bringing food into the state from food sources outside Oklahoma that might not otherwise be available
- Support the Oklahoma Food Banks' Food 4 Kids programs, which provide nutritious foods to chronically hungry children, in more than 300 Oklahoma elementary schools, over the weekend when school breakfast and lunch – their only other source of food in many cases - are unavailable. There are currently dozens of schools on the waiting list to join the program; with adequate funding, the Food 4 Kids program could expand into their schools to feed children in need.
- Support the Oklahoma Food Banks' Kids Cafe program, an after school program designed to provide ongoing support and a "safe haven" for at-risk children. During the school year, Kids Cafes provide nutritious snacks or an evening meal. In the summer, the program may provide breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack

- Support the Oklahoma Food Banks’ Senior Feeding Programs, which provide nutritious foods to homebound seniors and those living in senior centers
- Support the Oklahoma Food Banks’ Urban Harvest program, which supports community gardens and other community food security initiatives

The Oklahoma Food Bank Network and the charitable organizations it supports are an invaluable resource in the fight against food insecurity. The innovative and effective programs they provide represent some of our best defenses against the threat of hunger. Realizing this, state governments have begun to provide funding to their food bank systems; 26 states currently provide state funding totaling more than \$100 million per year. A partnership with the State of Oklahoma to secure additional funding would do much to ease the burdens of food insecure Oklahomans.

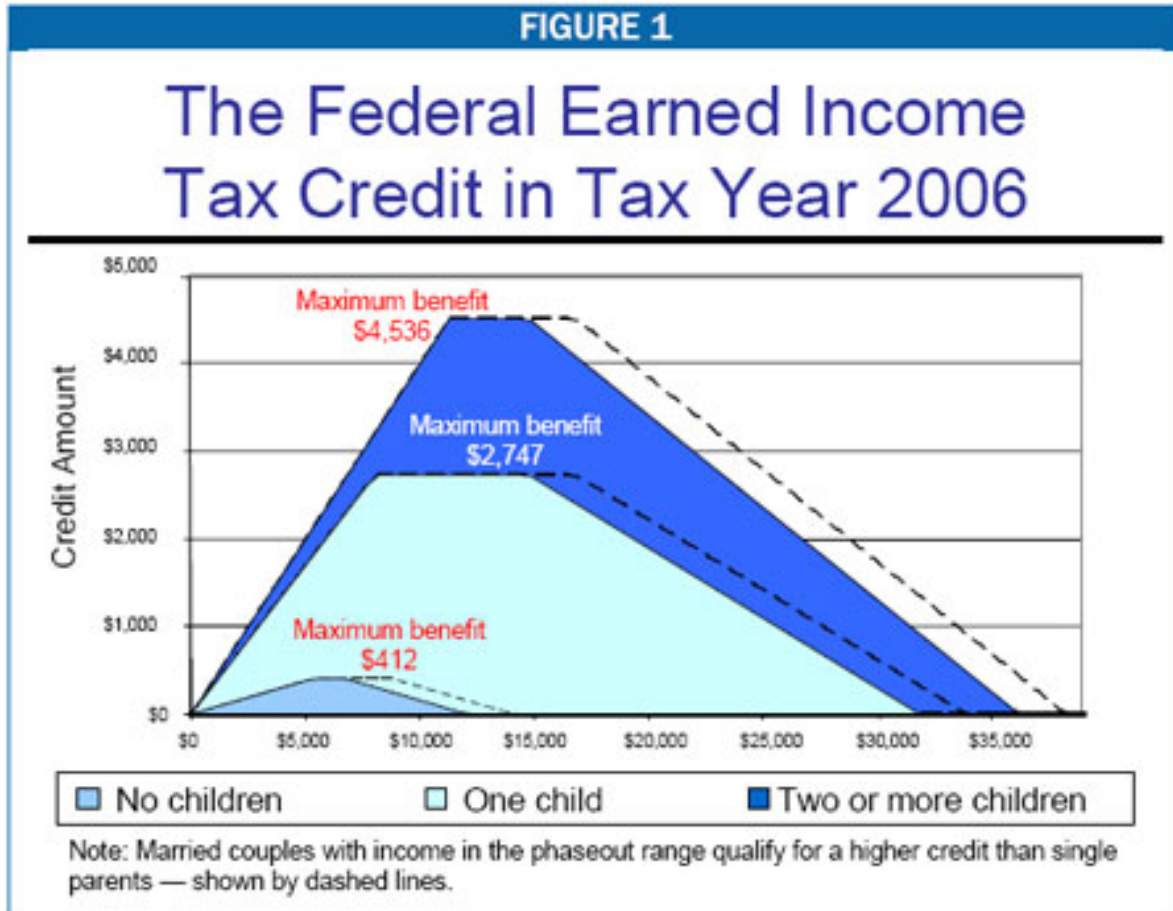
Increase Family Economic Stability

The food programs explored above exist because many Oklahomans, and other Americans, do not earn an income adequate for self-sufficiency. Although the causes of low-income are multi-faceted and sometimes difficult to disentangle in regard to public policy, much success has been achieved through the use of clear and simple tax policies that benefit working families and vulnerable populations. In Oklahoma, further good could be achieved by focusing on and strengthening the Earned Income Tax Credit programs and the Oklahoma Sales Tax Relief Credit. Although there are other tax instruments that can be used to bolster family economic stability, such as child and housing credits, the tax instruments explored below are especially focused on those families most vulnerable to hunger and food insecurity. By strengthening these credits, Oklahoma could fundamentally increase the food security of its citizens, while also decreasing demand on public and private assistance programs.

1. Strengthen the State Earned Income Tax Credit programs

The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which provides financial assistance to lower income parents and individuals, was first enacted in 1975. Although it was initially a very modest program, it has enjoyed broad bipartisan support since its inception and has been expanded in subsequent major tax bills in 1986, 1990, 1993, and 2001. The EITC aims to alleviate poverty by “helping those who help themselves.” The EITC gradually phases in as individuals work and earn income, plateaus once a specific income amount has been reached, and then gradually phases out. In this way, the tax credit serves to reward work, not replace it. Although all individuals are eligible for the EITC at certain income levels, the eligibility formula focuses on providing support to families with children. In addition to the federal EITC, lower-income Oklahomans are also eligible to claim the Oklahoma state EITC. Oklahoma’s state EITC is piggybacked to the federal EITC, so the same filers are eligible for

both. Both tax credits are also *refundable*, meaning that filers receive the full credit even if it exceeds their tax liability. Currently, the state EITC is set at 5% of the federal EITC, which provided for a maximum credit of \$226 in 2006. The benefit rates for the federal EITC are shown below.



Federal EITC

- More than 20% of Oklahoma tax filers, roughly 300,000 taxpayers, claim the federal EITC. On average, they receive more than \$1,800 from the credit.^{xxx}
- An estimated 75% of those who are eligible for the EITC claim it each year. The participation rate for filers without child dependents is only about 45%, but the participation rates for those with one or two qualifying children are 96% and 93%, respectively.^{xxxii} The vast majority of taxpayers who fail to claim the EITC when eligible do not file a tax return.^{xxxiii} Most of the filers who are eligible but do not participate have no qualifying children. For households with children, the EITC has a participation rate that is much higher than almost all other social programs.
- The EITC is the nation's most effective anti-poverty program, lifting more than 2 million children out of poverty each year, more than any other social program or category of programs.^{xxxiii} By

rewarding work, the program provides for human needs while also encouraging recipients to work towards self-sufficiency.

- In 2005, Oklahoma received about \$595 million in federal EITC claims, generating significant economic activity in the state.
- Roughly 98 percent of the money accessed through the credit goes to families with children.^{xxxiv}

Oklahoma's EITC

- Roughly 90 percent of Oklahomans who claim the federal EITC also claim the state EITC.^{xxxv}
- Of the 21 states that have their own EITC programs, most have much higher benefit levels than Oklahoma. Kansas, for instance, sets their EITC benefit at 15% of the federal level. Other states (DE, MD, MN, NJ, NY, RI, VT, VA, WI) set their benefits between 20 to 43 percent of the federal level.

In order to maximize the impact of the EITC programs, Oklahoma should:

1. Explore ways to increase awareness of the program's benefits and eligibility requirements, particularly among those with low rates of participation (individuals without children and individuals who do not file taxes); and
2. Consider raising the value of the state EITC from 5 percent of the value of the federal credit to 10 percent.

2. Strengthen Oklahoma's Sales Tax Relief Credit

The sales tax is the second largest government revenue source for Oklahoma's state and local governments (behind the income tax and property taxes, respectively). The proceeds from sales taxes are used to provide powerful and effective government services for Oklahoma's communities. Yet, unlike most other forms of taxation, Oklahoma's sales tax disproportionately falls on those who are least able to afford it. Because low-income families spend a larger percentage of their income on consumer purchases and less on budget items like savings and investments than higher-income families, they also pay a larger percentage of their income in sales taxes on those purchases. In this sense, Oklahoma's sales tax is a regressive tax, with the effective tax rate increasing as the income of the taxpayer declines, rather than a progressive tax, where the effective rate rises with the taxpayer's ability to pay.

Much of the regressivity of the sales tax occurs because it is levied on food, which is a relatively "inelastic" good, demand for which is largely resistant to both price and the income of the consumer. According to the USDA, the median food cost per person is \$41.67 per week, or roughly \$2000 per year.^{xxxvi} In Oklahoma, the state sales tax applied to that amount of food would come to \$90, not including sales taxes levied by municipalities. That is equivalent to a full month of the average Food

Stamp (FSP) benefit. For families dealing with food insecurity, the sales tax on groceries is yet another obstacle to adequate nutrition.

In order to ease this tax burden on vulnerable families while also preserving the revenue-generating capacity of the sales tax, the State of Oklahoma offers the Sales Tax Relief Credit, which residents can file with their tax returns. In order to qualify for the credit, a filer must:

- A. Be a resident of Oklahoma and have lived in the state for the entire year.
- B. Have a total gross household income below \$20,000 unless one of the following conditions applies AND the filer has a total gross household income below \$50,000
 - i. The filer claims an exemption for a dependent
 - ii. The filer or spouse are 65 years of age or older
 - iii. The filer or spouse has a physical disability constituting a substantial handicap to employment (proof of condition must be provided)

The Sales Tax Relief Credit provides a rebate of \$40 per eligible person in the household. The Sales Tax Relief Credit can be claimed in one of three ways.

1. Taxpayers that are recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) receive their \$40 per dependent and themselves as part of their monthly allotment from DHS. DHS is reimbursed by the Oklahoma Tax Commission. If persons receive the credit through DHS, they are ineligible to claim it on a tax return. The amount of total credit accessed through this route is about \$546,000 per year.
2. Medicaid eligible nursing home recipients get their \$40 credit in January as a direct payment from DHS as well, totaling about \$3.2 million to more than 78,000 recipients. These recipients are also ineligible to claim the credit on tax returns.
3. Other taxpayers may file claims with the Oklahoma Tax Commission. Last year, this amounted to 447,158 returns claiming total credits of \$39.4 million, or about \$88 in credit per return, indicating that about 985,187 persons got some sort of Sales Tax Relief Credit.

The credit provides a strong framework for alleviating the sales tax burden on vulnerable families, but its success is currently limited by the inadequate amount of assistance available through the credit and gaps in participation in the program. In order to maximize the impact of the Sales Tax Relief Credit, Oklahoma should:

1. Explore ways to increase awareness of the program's benefits and eligibility requirements; and
2. Consider substantially raising the value of the credit, possibly to the point that it would provide a reasonable expectation of a full rebate for sales taxes levied on grocery

purchases. Increasing the value of the credit would also serve to heighten the visibility of the credit and drive additional participation. If the value of the credit were gradually phased upwards to \$90 per person, the expected value of the sales tax on groceries for claimants, the credit would distribute an additional \$50 million per year at the current rate of participation.

Strengthen Community Food Security

Community food security is a term which describes the ability of residents within an area to leverage local resources, such as local agriculture and distribution systems, to access enough nutritious, culturally acceptable foods to live a healthy life. A food secure community strives towards self-reliance in providing for the food needs of its own residents. A food secure community takes comprehensive responses to local food, farm and nutrition issues. A food secure community is also one in which the general public is aware of food security issues, food assistance programs and agricultural resources within their community. Oklahoma has rich agricultural and community resources that can allow our communities to rely more upon ourselves and our neighbors to produce and distribute a full, and nutritionally rich, range of foods. Through indigenous and holistic initiatives, we can bring our food system “closer to home” and ensure that local resources are used to feed those in need in our communities.

Key factors contributing to the food security of a community include:

- having the food and nutrition literacy needed to make healthy choices
- sufficient household income and resources to purchase nutritious foods
- access to all available food assistance programs when household resources are lacking
- adequate number and distribution of food outlets offering affordable nutritious foods
- support for local food production at the household, neighborhood and farm scale
- necessary infrastructure to make locally produced foods readily available to everyone
- general awareness of the food security issues facing the community and the resources available to combat food insecurity

1. Create a Food Security Council

Recognizing that food insecurity and hunger are caused by a number of contributing factors, and that many state and nonprofit agencies have programs aimed at reducing hunger, there is a need to bring these efforts together in a collaborative way in order to significantly improve the food security of both individuals, as well as communities.

A statewide Food Security Council operating through a public/private partnership or other forum method could bring together the expertise of hunger relief and community food security practitioners to fully assess food insecurity throughout Oklahoma and identify, apply and pursue the necessary resources. The council would also play a key role in monitoring the progress of Oklahoma's anti-hunger initiatives and setting benchmarks for performance.

A Food Security council could also play a leading role in formulating strategies to better connect Oklahoma's many faith-based food assistance programs with both government agencies and other private partners, like the Oklahoma Food Bank network. For various reasons, a substantial number of Oklahoma's faith-based food pantries, soup kitchens, and other charitable programs have not been adequately connected to these larger resource bases, which has the affect of greatly reducing their program capabilities. Connecting these faith-based groups with other public and private partners could have a very significant impact on the prevalence of hunger in Oklahoma.

In order to increase general awareness of food security issues, the Food Security Council should also engage in education and outreach activities. For instance, the council could work with public and private partners to sponsor a statewide campaign (Hunger is not OK!) highlighting Oklahoma's hunger problem.

2. Collect and compile detailed county and community data relating food security issues

In order to best facilitate Oklahoma's anti-hunger initiatives, Oklahoma should work to collect and compile currently unavailable county data such as the presence of grocery stores, food banks and other outlets within proximity to at-risk populations. A detailed listing of hunger relief and prevention programs by county is also needed to identify existing resources and possible gaps. Through compiling this detailing mapping data, Oklahoma could identify and set benchmarks for progress in outreach, participation, food availability and other areas. This is a task that could potentially be accomplished by the Food Security Council described above.

3. Explore ways to support community food security initiatives in Oklahoma's communities

Although strengthening public and private food assistance programs and increasing family economic stability are the immediate priorities in Oklahoma's fight against food insecurity, efforts to strengthen community food security and support sustainable, local food systems are key to the long-term success of our goals. Understanding that, Oklahoma should follow the lead established by the USDA's Community Food Security Initiative (CFSI) and explore ways to encourage food production on the local level, so that Oklahoma's communities will increasingly be able to meet many of their own food needs. The following are some of the potential initiatives Oklahoma could undertake:

- Encourage the use of home and community gardens for food production
Vegetable gardening is a learned skill lacking by many Oklahomans, especially younger generations, and is one that can prove very helpful in obtaining the food, nutrients and physical activity needed for living a healthy life. A strong presence of food gardens across the state is a key step toward improving our community food security. Efforts to increase home and community gardening throughout Oklahoma need the full support of our elected officials and public agencies.
- Support efforts to provide farmers' markets with the technology for accepting food stamps
Farmers' markets are a good source of high quality, nutritious, home-grown foods. Locally grown produce is often more flavorful due to its freshness and the types of varieties grown. These factors combined with the opportunity to meet the farmer and to know where one's food came from, offer strong incentives for customers to increase their intake of fruits, vegetables and other nutritious foods. Because FSP benefits are no longer paper-based, but instead are electronically transferred through the use of the Oklahoma Access Card and a point-of-sale machine, farmers' markets in Oklahoma currently lack the technology to accept food stamp benefits and thus food stamp recipients lack access to the produce and other foods at our state's farmers' markets. In several other states, various forms of wireless technology for electronic balance transfer (EBT) are being utilized by farmers' markets and food stamp agencies.

Efforts are underway at OKDHS to establish a food stamp demonstration project at a farmers' market in 2008. The project will explore opportunities and potential barriers to expanding the acceptance of food stamp benefits at farmers' markets across Oklahoma. As the program is hopefully expanded beyond the demonstration project, funds may be needed to acquire the necessary technology and/or to assist with outreach to food stamp clients, providing information about using food stamps at farmers' markets.

- Explore the feasibility of applying for WIC and Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Programs in Oklahoma
The USDA's Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) offers grants to states which in turn distribute those funds to eligible mothers and seniors. These funds are issued by state agencies as coupons or checks specifically for purchasing fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets and farmstands. Although the Osage and Chickasaw nations within Oklahoma participate in the program, Oklahoma itself is one of only eight states not participating in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) or the Senior FMNP. Oklahoma also ranks last in the nation for our consumption of fruits and vegetables. While future federal funding for "new" states such as Oklahoma is uncertain, states are still encouraged to develop plans to implement these programs for use, in the event that new funding is allocated. Oklahoma should investigate whether or not this program would be of benefit to families in our state and, if so, develop and submit plans to the USDA.

- Support creative transportation methods for connecting at-risk populations with nutritious foods

A lack of reliable transportation is one barrier to accessing nutritious foods for low-income residents. Given that thirty-two Oklahoma counties are considered food deserts, where at least 25% of the county residents live 10 or more miles from a supermarket or supercenter, it's not difficult to imagine the transportation challenges this presents. Even in our urban areas, many neighborhoods only have convenient stores, which lack greatly in their selection of real food.

Vanpooling and other transportation arrangements need support to help connect low-income residents with grocers, farmers' markets and other sources of healthful foods.

- Eliminate sales tax at farmers' markets

Currently at farmers' markets in Oklahoma, farmers' are required to collect and remit sales tax on items sold to the public. Most farmers include the sales tax within their asking price, to avoid time consuming calculations as customers pay. They then have to deduct this amount, approaching nearly ten percent for combined state, county and city taxes, from their daily receipts.

Given the numerous benefits of a strong local farm economy to our community food security, any efforts to increase local farmers' profitability and success are strongly encouraged. Removing the sales tax burden from farmers and their customers is one simple step towards supporting the availability of locally grown foods in our communities.

Recommendations for the 2008 Legislative Session

- Approve a resolution affirming the goal of reducing food insecurity at or below the current national average within the next five years.
- Create a Food Security Council.
- Increase the capacity of the private charitable emergency food network.
- Increase the number of front line workers for food stamp and other support services applications.
- Launch pilot programs to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program.
- Increase participation in the Summer Food Service Program.
- Strengthen the state Earned Income Tax Credit Program.
- Strengthen Oklahoma's Sales Tax Relief Credit.
- Eliminate sales tax at farmers markets.

(The Hunger Task Force did not rank or list in any priority order.)

APPENDICES:

- A- Copy of SB 499
- B- Sources Cited and Consulted

Appendix A

ENROLLED SENATE
BILL NO. 499

By: Rice, Johnson (Constance) and Gumm of
the Senate

and

Steele, Cox, Peters, McDaniel (Jeannie),
Nations, McAffrey, Pittman, Shumate,
Hoskin, Inman and Winchester of the
House

An Act relating to poor persons; creating the Oklahoma Task Force on Hunger; providing duties; setting membership; permitting certain task force to meet as needed; authorizing travel reimbursement in certain circumstances; directing certain staff support; requiring certain report; providing for codification; providing an effective date; and declaring an emergency.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF OKLAHOMA:

SECTION 1. NEW LAW A new section of law to be codified in the Oklahoma Statutes as Section 245 of Title 56, unless there is created a duplication in numbering, reads as follows:

A. There is hereby created until December 31, 2007, the Oklahoma Task Force on Hunger. The task force shall consider, but not be limited to, making recommendations about the following:

1. Strategies for coordinating services among federal, state, faith-based and nonprofit organizations;
2. Strategies for extending existing programs and outreach efforts to serve more people;
3. Strategies to involve schools to identify and improve students' access to sufficient and nutritious food;
4. Strategies to connect eligible hungry people with existing programs;
5. Recommendations for provider accountability;

6. Recommendations for funding sources to implement the recommendations; and
 7. Recommendations for legislation to implement the findings of the task force.
- B. The task force shall be composed of fifteen (15) members as follows:
1. The Secretary of Health or a designee;
 2. The Director of the Department of Human Services or a designee;
 3. The Commissioner of Health or a designee;
 4. The Commissioner of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services or designee;
 5. The Director of the Oklahoma Health Care Authority or a designee;
 6. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction or a designee;
 7. One member appointed by the Governor from a list submitted by a nonprofit regional food bank organization representing central and western Oklahoma;
 8. One member appointed by the Governor from a list submitted by a nonprofit regional food bank organization representing eastern Oklahoma;
 9. One member appointed by the Governor from a list submitted by a statewide organization of child advocates;
 10. Two members appointed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate representing faith-based organizations involved in hunger programs;
 11. One member appointed by the President Pro Tempore from a list submitted by a comprehensive antipoverty agency whose mission is to help families in need achieve self-sufficiency;
 12. One member appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives from a list submitted by a statewide organization representing senior citizens;
 13. One member appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives from a list submitted by a nonprofit educational organization that assists in developing sustainable food and farming systems; and
 14. One member appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives from a list submitted by a nonprofit organization committed to effective solutions and key policies which affect hunger and poverty.

C. The members of the task force shall select a chair and vice-chair from among its membership. A quorum of the task force shall be required in order for any final action of the task force.

D. The task force may meet as often as may be required in order to perform the duties imposed upon it.

E. The meetings of the task force shall be subject to the Oklahoma Open Meeting Act.

F. Members of the task force shall receive no compensation for their services, but shall be reimbursed for reasonable and necessary travel expenses incurred in the performance of their duties by their respective agency pursuant to the provisions of the State Travel Reimbursement Act. Members appointed by the Governor, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives shall be reimbursed by the Department of Human Services pursuant to the provisions of the State Travel Reimbursement Act.

G. Staff support for the task force shall be provided by the Department of Human Services.

H. The task force shall submit a report of its findings and recommendations to the Governor, the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate by December 31, 2007.

SECTION 2. This act shall become effective July 1, 2007.

SECTION 3. It being immediately necessary for the preservation of the public peace, health and safety, an emergency is hereby declared to exist, by reason whereof this act shall take effect and be in full force from and after its passage and approval.

Passed the Senate the 20th day of February, 2007.

Presiding Officer of the Senate

Passed the House of Representatives the 25th day of April, 2007.

Presiding Officer of the House
of Representatives

Appendix B

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