

Everett: Solving hunger and poverty requires teamwork

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Crossing lines to work together is essential in addressing hunger and poverty, advocate Jeremy Everett of Baylor University told participants at the Fellowship Southwest Compassion & Justice Conference, Sept. 21 in Dallas.

Everett, founding director of the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, recounted an event where multiple parties showed up across sectors to meet a need.

The days leading up to COVID-19's widespread arrival in the United States were fraught with concern of an impending crisis the USDA saw coming among the food-insecure population, Everett said.

Weeks before the pandemic hit in its full intensity, Everett was in Washington, D.C., on an unrelated matter, when he received an unexpected call from the head of the U.S. Department of Agriculture requesting his immediate presence at the Whitten Building.

A call from the USDA secretary is not an everyday occurrence, even for the director of an organization dedicated to cultivating "scalable solutions to end hunger," Everett stated.

While he assumed he'd done something terribly wrong to be called in, Everett found out it was even worse than that.

Everett recalled being warned the coming pandemic would be much worse than anyone knew, a shutdown of an unknown duration was likely, and people facing food insecurity would be severely impacted.

The lead up

In the summer of 2019, the Baylor Collaborative—then known as the Texas Hunger Initiative—had piloted [a 10-week food-distribution program](#) called “Meals to You,” using selected rural counties in Texas as “the test kitchen.” The program was designed to meet the unique food distribution needs of rural communities.

“Meals to You” involved shipping a week’s worth of food directly to the homes of children who participated in meal programs. It had proven to have equal impact on food insecurity, if not greater, than the USDA model of feeding children, which until then had been “the gold standard.”

The USDA secretary and undersecretary wanted to know: “Is there any way that you can scale up the ‘Meals to You’ program nationwide?”

The department estimated 25,000 families would need “Meals to You” provisions, Everett explained. Without discussing the question of scalability with his staff, Everett committed to scaling the program nationwide.

Shortly after he left the Whitten Building the estimate grew to 50,000 families. By the time he was on a plane back to Waco, 150,000 was the number.

The implementation

By the time of kickoff the following week, the Baylor Collaborative and McLane Global had 270,000 children signed up to receive meals “because their parents didn’t know how in the world they were going to provide food for their kids during a shutdown,” Everett recalled.

“Kids were so remote in Alaska, they required seaplanes and boats and barges to be able to get food boxes to children where they were living,” he continued.

Mules were used to deliver food boxes into the Grand Canyon. The United States Postal Service and United Parcel Service drivers dropped off food boxes elsewhere.

“What was remarkable about this endeavor was the USDA brought their best to bear,” Everett said.

Congress’ bipartisan support made sure they had the resources they needed to provide food for the hungry, he continued. The private sector of the food industry stepped up with Pepsi-Co, Chartwells and other major food companies’ social enterprises arms providing and packaging the food.

UPS Go Brown—without being asked, because they’d recognized the increased shipments into some areas—played a major role in the distribution of boxes, with some delivery drivers relocating “during a pandemic to get food boxes out to the kids, because they knew they needed it.”

Everett asserted “all these groups brought their best to bear.” And it showed collaboration is possible and critical.

“The only way that we can solve for these big social issues is working together,” he said. And this case demonstrated “it is still possible to get bipartisan agreement on critical intervention.”

The Baylor Collaborative team works with the three-prong approach of research, practice and policy. The research continued to demonstrate the efficacy of the program when practiced over several years. In fact, the more rural and remote the child, the more beneficial the “Meals to You” program proved to be.

So, the Baylor Collaborative was able to go back to Congress, show their research, and earn bipartisan legislation to make “Meals to You” a permanent solution available to food insecure children in rural areas.

The work isn't finished

Everett urged attendees to seek out opportunities to serve the hungry and the poor by proximity to the problem, because Jesus embodied a preference for the poor and identified the poor as members of his family.

“Sometimes we treat the poor like they just need to be better at financial management,” but disability and structural racism, the two biggest predictors of poverty, aren’t issues of poor financial training, he suggested.

Hunger and poverty are on the rise globally after many pre-pandemic years of improvement, but widespread food insecurity is a litmus test for the health and wellbeing of the world, a nation or a community.

When society turns a blind eye to children dying of hunger around the world in areas of conflict and crisis, or here in the states where governors turn down funding to expand child nutrition for their own political gain, “hunger becomes a litmus test for our souls,” Everett asserted.

“What has spiritually gone awry to justify child starvation or to act passively, offering our thoughts and prayers, as if we have no agency to improve these conditions?”