

Challenge: Eliminate barriers that limit access to healthy food

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DALLAS—Improved access to healthy food means eliminating both geographic and economic barriers, speakers told the fifth annual Dallas Hunger Summit.

That involves making fresh fruit and vegetables available in the neighborhoods major supermarkets don't serve, and it requires economic development initiatives and job training, they emphasized.

The summit, convened by the Dallas Coalition for Hunger Solutions, explored policies and programs to fight food insecurity, particularly among children and senior adults. Sponsors included Dallas Baptist Association, Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas and the Texas Hunger Initiative, based at Baylor University.

Work in collaboration and cooperation

By working together, the private and public sectors, as well as the nonprofit and faith communities are making a difference in eliminating hunger in the United States, said Jeremy Everett, director of the Texas Hunger Initiative.

Everett praised the Dallas Coalition for Hunger Solutions as “the best in the country” in terms of making a collective impact through collaboration and cooperation.



Jeremy Everett, director of the Texas Hunger Initiative at Baylor University, served on the National Commission on Hunger. (Matthew Minard/Baylor Marketing & Communications) Everett, who served on the National Commission on Hunger, moderated a panel discussion that included two other commission members—Cherie Jamason, chief executive officer of the Food Bank of Northern Nevada, and Russell Sykes, senior fellow at the Empire Center for New York State Policy and former deputy commissioner of the New York State Office of Temporary Disability Assistance.

Everett described the commissioners' visits to colonias—unincorporated communities that typically lack access to clean water and utilities—along the Texas/Mexico border.

One resident of a community outside El Paso was more fortunate than many of her neighbors, because her home had electricity, he recalled. But a look inside the woman's refrigerator revealed it only contained chicken bones to make broth.

"I want my kids to know at least something is there," she told the commissioners.

To combat that problem, a man named Jesus in the El Paso area coordinated a program that employed 40 high-school students to deliver food to remote sites as part of a summer meals program, feeding 4,000 children a day.

Economic insecurity leads to food insecurity

The panelists discussed the link between economic insecurity and food insecurity.

“Hunger is not just about food,” Jamason said. It also involves issues such as housing, childcare, low-wage jobs and lack of transportation.

“At the end of the day, the best solution to the problem of hunger for anybody is a job that pays a decent wage,” Jamason said.

Sykes emphasized the importance of helping people take responsibility for their own lives and the need to expand employment training. He lamented the “huge ideological divide” in the United States that discourages bipartisanship and statesmanship.



Audrey Rowe

Start with what works locally

Audrey Rowe, national administrator for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service, likewise discussed the challenges in fighting hunger.

However, she pointed to success in preserving the nutrition safety net for children and senior adults and to programs that encourage people to make healthy food choices.

Communities know their own needs, and they need to be empowered to address them, she stressed.

“Start with what works in your community,” she said. “Change has to come locally—block by block by block.”

Hunger as a health issue

Donald Weeson, president of Baylor Scott & White Health’s Diabetes Health and Wellness Institute, talked about the importance of nutrition in managing and preventing diabetes, as well as the specific challenges faced by low-income families.

“Fresh fruit and vegetables are good for health. It’s what your grandmother told you: ‘Eat your vegetables,’” Weeson said.

However, healthy choices are more difficult in communities where the only readily available food sources are corner convenience stores, he noted. Weeson pointed to the importance of farm stands in low-income areas and to the need to make farm-fresh produce affordable.

Healthy choices also demand changes in learned behavior, he added. People need instruction in how to prepare healthy and affordable meals, he said.

Where these programs are put into place in low-income neighborhoods, hospitals such as Baylor Scott & White see a decrease in emergency room usage and overnight patient admissions, he reported.

Racial, ethnic and income inequality

Racial, ethnic and income inequality all contribute to hunger and food-insecurity, said Ann Beeson, executive director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities.

“Texas is one of the 10 worst states to be a child,” she said, noting one of four Texas children lives in poverty, and the poverty rates for Hispanic and African-American children are nearly three times higher than for Anglo or Asian children.

Furthermore, food insecurity affects black and Hispanic children in Texas at nearly twice the rate of white children, she added. In Texas, 38 percent of African-American children and 31 percent of Hispanic children experience food security, compared to 17 percent of white children.

“We’re never going to solve the hunger problem until we solve the poverty problem in this state,” she said.