

A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN FOR FOOD SECURITY IN SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA: Closing the Hunger Gap

Prospectus

THE CHALLENGE

The efforts of many in southwestern Pennsylvania over the past several decades, combined with the positive impact of improvements in government programs, have helped to ease the pain of hunger for many. Still, hunger and food insecurity persist with far too many of our neighbors lacking the means to acquire sufficient food to meet their nutritional needs.

The large number of people of the region currently donating to and volunteering with hunger relief organizations demonstrates that the people of our region care about their neighbors who don't have enough to eat. They believe that easing hunger is simply "the right thing to do" and are concerned with the severe negative effects that hunger has on the individual infant, child, senior or others challenged by food insecurity.

Often unrecognized, however, is the cumulative impact that these negative effects on individuals have on the prosperity and quality of life of our region. Research reveals that allowing hunger to continue burdens our nation, our state and our region with substantial additional costs for medical and mental health care due to increases in illness and psychosocial dysfunction; reduced educational achievement and lowered worker productivity. Allowing food insecurity to persist drives up governmental

expenditures, particularly education and health care costs, and diminishes economic growth. It is a serious problem that demands the attention of all who care about the future of southwestern Pennsylvania. Conversely, eliminating hunger and easing food insecurity can have a positive regional economic impact while improving the wellness, productivity and quality of life. In recent years, national and state “blueprints” have provided vehicles for advancing the cause of ending hunger. None of these provided a clear and comprehensive action plan to achieve their goals or sustain the effort. A plan for a focused and sustained approach to relieve hunger is required.

The Southwestern Pennsylvania Food Security Collaborative was established to meet that need in the southwestern Pennsylvania region, comprising Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Lawrence, Somerset, Washington, and Westmoreland counties. A Task Force was formed --comprising representatives of government, health care, education, social service providers, faith-based organizations, labor and the corporate sector – to develop a plan to address the challenge of engaging the broader community in an effort to end hunger and reduce food insecurity in our communities.

THE COMMITMENT

Consistent with both the national and state blueprints, this plan for southwestern Pennsylvania recognizes that moving toward an end of hunger will require a broad-based commitment from all sectors of our society and all parts of our region. The objective of this comprehensive plan is to significantly reduce hunger and food insecurity in southwestern Pennsylvania during the next five years.

THE MEASUREMENT

To overcome the difficulty of measuring hunger, food insecurity and the impact of food assistance efforts at the regional and county level, the Task Force selected “Missing Meals” as a key metric. This methodology aggregates food assistance efforts and calculates unmet need. According to initial calculations using this metric, low income families in our region miss over 127 million meals each year. This metric will be used in combination with other available measurements including a calculation of the food

security rates at the county level and estimates of the resources required to alleviate food insecurity currently being developed under the auspices of Feeding America.

THE PLAN

The planning process determined **five overarching objectives** for achievement over the next half decade as well as a detailed one-year action plan and success measures for 2010-11. Progress will be gauged annually, with new action plans being developed each year based on accomplishments and changes in the operating environment.

✦ INCREASE ACCESS TO AND UTILIZATION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.

The Collaborative strategy to increase access and utilization of existing programs and services will focus on closing the Missing Meals gap in each of the twelve counties by building the **capacity** of food pantries food banks, and **maximizing access** to government food assistance programs. Our work will ensure that counties and communities are making full use of the government and public-private programs available to them. Moreover, the Collaborative will work to ensure that private providers, including churches, food pantries and food banks, have adequate **resources** available to serve their communities that fall between the gaps in government programs. Achievement of this goal necessarily includes an **outreach** component to better communicate with consumers about food assistance, nutrition, and eligibility for programs. The Collaborative will cooperate with the media, schools and other human service providers to educate and inform community leaders and people in need about available programs and services.

✦ BUILD BROAD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ENDING HUNGER.

Community engagement strategy will focus on the **community-at-large**, educating community leaders and the general public about the magnitude and impact of hunger and food insecurity in our region. In particular, the Collaborative recognizes the need to further engage the **business community** in efforts to fight hunger. Food pantries and other community-based food assistance providers will play an important role in education and communications efforts. The Collaborative will convene **grassroots**,

faith-based and community-based organizations to have them share best practices and collaborate within their communities.

✦ **ADVOCATE FOR STRONG PUBLIC POLICY SURROUNDING HUNGER RELIEF.**

The Collaborative policy strategy focuses on engaging local, state, and federal **government officials** in efforts to close the Missing Meals gap. With important elections approaching at all levels of government, the Collaborative's immediate attention will be towards developing relationships with new officials and leaders, educating them on the urgency of the hunger problem and providing them with tools to understand the impact of public policies on the alleviation of hunger in the region. The Collaborative plans to join with hunger-related organizations across the state to develop a **unified statewide strategy** to elevate the fight against hunger to a top government priority. Key to this strategy is accurate and thorough **data collection** about the scope and scale of the problem, as well as data on effective strategies.

✦ **COLLABORATE WITH OTHER SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS TO ADDRESS THE LARGER ISSUES OF POVERTY.**

Appropriately, **"Collaboration"** is the core strategy that will enable the Hunger Collaborative to achieve its goal of closing the Missing Meals gap. Instead of competing for valuable resources, the plan calls for providers across the social service spectrum to work together to address not only the issue of hunger, but the other systemic and social issues that cause hunger and food insecurity to persist in our region. Ultimately, the Collaborative hopes to inspire a more holistic, **"case management" approach** to consumers who are confronting issues such as financial insecurity, illiteracy, homelessness and persistent poverty. **Education** about other systems and service providers is crucial to creating motivation and buy-in at all levels of service. The Collaborative will engage and educate schools, service providers, faith-based organizations, and other systemic points of entry to better cross-market food assistance programs to low-income families. At the same time, food assistance programs can market other social services to consumers as well.

✦ **ENSURE MORE EFFICIENT ADMINISTRATION OF SYSTEMS AND RESOURCES.**

The Collaborative is committed to **increasing efficiency**, maintaining and improving effectiveness, and distributing resources to communities most in need. The five-year objective is full utilization in each of the twelve counties, as well as a significant decrease in the number of annual Missing Meals. The ambitious plans of the Collaborative will require not only committed leadership from all sectors, but **adequate staffing and resources** to move the comprehensive plan forward. Thus, priority is placed on creating a **sustainable structure** to oversee and implement the comprehensive plan. This includes formation of a Cabinet and a Board comprising leaders and stakeholders committed to implementation of the Comprehensive Plan.

THE TASK FORCE AND FOCUS GROUPS

The Task Force comprising stakeholders and key potential collaborators from throughout the region, representing the government, nonprofit, business and labor sectors, met monthly from January through June 2010. Focus Groups met between January and March 2010 in five locations in Butler, Delmont, Moon, Pittsburgh and Washington to gather additional input for the planning process. The Co-Chairs of the Task Force were Scott Lammie of UPMC Health Plan and Joyce Rothermel of Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank.

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