



**How to Engage Local and State Elected Officials in Support of
Child Hunger Initiatives**

Edward M. Cooney
Executive Director
Congressional Hunger Center
September 1, 2011

The Congressional Hunger Center gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the ConAgra Foods Foundation for The CHILD Project (Children's Hunger Initiative on Learning and Development) for which this paper was prepared.

Introduction

Local officials including mayors, city council members, selectmen, and county office holders are uniquely positioned to assist advocates and community groups in shaping policies that reduce child hunger. As former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill once said: "all politics is local". These individuals are the closest political forces available to citizens. They run for office because they see the needs of the community and believe that they can find solutions for existing problems. They have the power to issue ordinances, fund city agencies, and manage the operation of local governments.

State legislators and governors are also in an ideal position to have an impact on policies affecting child hunger. They have the diverse roles of policymaker, community consensus builder, and leader on social justice issues such as reducing hunger in their state and local communities.

But how do community groups and advocacy organizations get access to these leaders and decision-makers and what are some core messages that would resonate with them? This paper will review some of the techniques of effective advocacy with local and state officials and highlight two successful models at the local, county, and state level: the Act to End Hunger (Oregon) and a state/national level model, the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) Foundation for State Legislatures Hunger Partnership.

Key Components of Effective Advocacy with Local and State Officials

Political action can take many forms, but direct contact with elected officials is one of the most effective ways that citizens can influence the decisions of policymakers. The founding fathers thought that concept was so important that it protected your right to petition our government in the US Constitution.

One of the first rules of effective advocacy is learning the name and area that this official governs. It is also helpful to know the focus or expertise that this leader has (*i.e.*, education reform, taxes, energy, fiscal policy, etc). One tried and true approach to reaching elected officials is through writing a letter. Linda Locke, past president of the National Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Forum, recommends that letters should:

- be individual, handwritten letters, indicating that they are from a "real person."
- be brief (3 or 4 paragraphs in length).
- address only one topic.
- be specific, *i.e.*, seek support for increased state funding for quality child care insuring that children have access to healthy food.

- include personal experiences that highlight the importance of your recommendation; how will the support of this elected official for this recommendation affect you or your organization?

Face to face meetings with elected officials are an effective way to get action on your issue or broader agenda. If you are seeking increased funding for quality child care, as a way to reduce hunger in your community, then it is important to know if this elected official has children. Are these children in licensed child care? If taxes are an interest to this individual, then it is important to mention that unlicensed child care may not provide adequate food or quality care for children, but it is also important to note that the operators of such programs pay no taxes.

An effective way to gain access to and the attention of elected officials on the issue of increasing funding for quality child care is to put together a small group of advocates, child care program sponsors and providers, educators, and religious and business community representatives. Having a Rotary Club member as part of your group gives you credibility as part of the business community. Elected officials know that there is a relationship between nutrition and learning. So, having a teacher familiar with the nutrition component of a quality child care program participate in the meeting is very helpful. A member of the clergy adds a “moral dimension” to your group and elected officials usually give high regard to respected religious leaders.

Some groups have found success in focusing the attention of elected officials and the general public through print media, such as an op-ed or letter to the editor. This is a more indirect route but can be successful if the suggestions outlined above regarding letters to elected officials are followed. Practitioners of “social media” have had some success with legislators skilled in this type of communication.

Core Messages

Elected officials at all levels are inundated with requests for assistance on numerous topics. Some care has to be taken in who you approach and how you approach them. If you are seeking increased funding from the state legislature for quality child care programs as a strategy to reduce hunger then it is important that you get the support of a leader on the Education Committee or the Appropriation Committee so that your request can be acted on by the committees that have the power to help you. Your message has to be clear and powerful:

- access to quality child care allows children to develop the building blocks for later success in school and life.
- it is the most significant indicator that children have access to healthy meals.
- it allows parents to work knowing that their children are safe.
- it is severely under-funded in your state.

It is important that your core message is supported by hard data. If relevant surveys, studies, or research projects that demonstrate a shortfall of funds for quality child care programs in your state are available, then these should be summarized and presented in support of your request.

Successful Models for Engaging Local and State Elected Officials

The Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force and the Act to End Hunger (Oregon)

“We can only win the battle against hunger if we all work together—government, business, nonprofits, the faith community and every individual” (Governor Ted Kulongoski announcing Oregon Harvest week, October 10, 2003). In October 2003, Governor Kulongoski held a Hunger Summit for groups interested in finding solutions to hunger in Oregon. **An Act to End Hunger**, which set out “40 ways in five years to make a difference”, was inspired by this Hunger Summit. In 2003, Oregon was the number one state in the US in terms of hunger, according to U S Department of Agriculture data. By 2008, Oregon moved to the middle of the pack by implementing its plan of 40 ways to reduce hunger.

The Act to End Hunger was a strategic plan designed by the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force, its allies in the business, religious and anti hunger communities, as well as local and state elected officials to give Oregonians “a focus and guide to eliminate hunger in Oregon”. The essence of the plan was to provide specific proposals and concrete steps to ensure family economic stability and community food security. By establishing close working relations with state legislators between 2003 and 2008, the Task Force saw progress on 26 of the 40 action steps in the plan and has set in motion activities to complete the entire strategic plan.

The Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force published a report highlighting how the Act to End Hunger succeeded in enhancing family economic stability by:

- developing living wage opportunities by assisting low-income parents in pursuit of college educations.
- strengthening family stability by getting an increase in Oregon’s Affordable Housing Tax Credit.
- protecting low wage workers by making the Oregon Income Tax Credit permanently refundable.
- creating an adequate safety net for those unable to work by increasing TANF program supports.

The report also detailed how the Act to End Hunger succeeded in enhancing community food security by:

- establishing a State Food Policy Council, providing a vehicle for developing new leaders in the fight against hunger.

- providing bonus dollars for use of SNAP benefits at farmers markets.
- increased funding for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and Senior Farmers' Market Voucher programs.

Governor Kulongoski highlighted the impact of community groups engaged in creative anti hunger campaigns with local and state elected officials when he said: “the most exciting thing about this collaborative ACT TO END HUNGER is that we can already see the impact from our actions. Even though thousands of Oregonians still struggle to keep food on the table, more families now have access to tax credits, nutrition support programs and other services that can help them through tough times. Working together does make a difference.” (May 2008)

Now in 2011, the Task Force is still carrying on the fight to end hunger in Oregon. The group is pursuing strategies to preserve and where possible expand funding for emergency food distribution program, school breakfast and summer food programs as well as WIC/ Senior Farm programs. Head Start, Child and Adult Day Care Program, After School Meal and Snack, TANF and affordable housing programs remain high priorities. Through these activities, the Task Force will achieve its goal of family economic security as well as community food security.

The National Conference of State Legislature (NCSL) Foundation Hunger Partnership

In 2010 the NCSL Foundation invited several major companies and three leading national anti-hunger groups to join state legislators from 14 states to raise the visibility of hunger in America and offer innovative and lasting solutions. The goal of this year long initiative is to connect the public and private sectors to improve the availability of healthy food for hungry families.

According to the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) most recent report, a record high of 50 million Americans experienced food insecurity in 2009. This number included 17 million children. This means that nearly 1 in 4 children was at risk of hunger in 2009. These numbers are simply unacceptable in a country that has the financial resources and moral commitment to assist all those individuals and families in need of food assistance. The NCSL Foundation public/private partnership was established because there are currently great opportunities to capitalize on federal, state, private and nonprofit initiatives to combat hunger in America. Corporate leaders, nonprofit organizations, and individual states, working together with the USDA, can mobilize to counter the increasing number of families sliding into poverty and hunger. As USDA Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Service (FNCS) Kevin Concannon said at the 2009 NCSL annual meeting in Louisville: “States really are the most significant partners in delivering food assistance to low-income families and administering the 15 feeding programs that are the nation's first line of defense for ending hunger and providing needed nutrition”.

NCSL staff reports that in 2010 several state legislatures, working directly with local anti-hunger groups and private sector partners, produced legislation reducing hunger and poverty in their states. Arkansas passed legislation calling for an appropriation to the Department of Financial Administration for grants to the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance to support hunger relief efforts throughout the state amounting to \$2 million. Colorado enacted legislation requiring the Colorado Department of Human Services to promote awareness and access to the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and to work with counties to reduce barriers and costs to accessing the program. Massachusetts passed legislation creating a statewide food policy council. The purpose of the council is to develop recommendations to advance increased production of Massachusetts-grown food, develop and promote programs that deliver Massachusetts-grown foods to residents, and protect land and water resources required for sustained local food production. Another goal is the training, retention, and recruitment of farmers and the continued economic viability of local food production. Texas passed legislation creating a grant program to provide children at risk of hunger or obesity with increased access to nutritional foods.

The NCSL Foundation partners met three times between 2010 and 2011. The private sector members include: AARP, American Beverage Association, Cargill, Food Marketing Institute, General Mills, Mead Johnson Nutrition, Nestlé USA, Walmart and Yum! Brands. The advisory partners include: Congressional Hunger Center, Feeding America, and Food Research and Action Center. The first meeting was held in Phoenix, Arizona at NCSL's Fall Forum (December 10, 2010) where the partnership identified priorities for 2011. The second session was in Boston (April 20, 2011) at NCSL's Spring Executive meeting. The partners went on a site visit to The Food Project where youth and teens are trained to become leaders in the creation of a sustainable food system in greater Boston. Audrey Rowe, Administrator of Food and Nutrition Service at USDA, and Dr. Deborah Frank of the Grow Clinic spoke to the group about the role of government and the health system in providing assistance to low-income families. Margaret McKenna, President of the Walmart Foundation and Ellen Luger, Executive Director of the General Mills Foundation educated partners on the role of corporate foundations in addressing issues of hunger and poverty. The final meeting was in San Antonio, Texas at the NCSL Legislative Summit. This meeting was on the topic "How to Bring Legislators to the Table." Panelists include Kevin Concannon, FNCS Under Secretary at USDA; JoAnn Jenkins, President AARP Foundation; and Laura Melillo, Executive Director, Yum! Brands Foundation and Global Community Relations. Panelists reviewed innovative practices to increase access to SNAP, WIC and school meals programs for children, families, veterans, and elderly. This discussion was based upon a new publication, "Bringing Legislators to the Table/ Addressing Hunger through Public-Private Partnerships", written by Marie Lawrence, a 2010-2011 participant in the Congressional Hunger Center's Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program, placed with the NCSL Hunger Partnership. The partners then toured the San Antonio Food Bank.

“Bringing Legislators to the Table” is available through NCSL. It focuses on:

- SNAP, including selected programs that provide innovative approaches to outreach, application assistance and how to increase access to food retailers that accept SNAP.
- child nutrition, including model programs improving quality of school meals and after school meal programs.
- food distribution, including examples of increasing the availability of healthier food items.
- healthy food access, including suggestions on how to increase access to locally grown foods.

Conclusion

Engaging local and state elected officials in your community in anti-hunger work greatly enhances your likelihood of success.