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THE ROLE OF STATE GOVERNMENT IN ENDING HUNGER

Prepared for the Congressional Hunger Center

By Sheri Steisel and Ann Morse *

State government is a key partner in the fight to end hunger in the United States. State policymakers administer a range of nutrition assistance and feeding programs including food stamps, WIC, school lunch, school breakfast, afterschool and summer feeding programs. State lawmakers appropriate funds for many of these programs and often provide discretionary funds for food banks and pantries. When necessary, states have funded food stamp replacement programs, especially for legal immigrants who were prevented from accessing these programs under federal law. State legislators have been leaders in addressing the issue of obesity, especially childhood obesity, with a range of innovative ideas. State elected officials, as community leaders, often engage the public, especially the private sector, to become part of hunger prevention efforts. State elected officials have credibility with their federal counterparts. Members of Congress, many having served in state legislatures themselves, rely on the views of state lawmakers about the operation of nutrition programs in their states and the impact of any changes in federal rules and funding.

One of the most promising and feasible ways to expand efforts to combat hunger in the United States is to build on these efforts of state policymakers and increase the knowledge base of public officials and administrators about what they can do to tackle this complex problem. This paper identifies several policy and structural models that could be used to effectively engage state policymakers with the goal of enhancing and improving policy development and leadership in this area.

State hunger relief efforts face significant barriers. The current state fiscal crisis, a cumulative budget gap of more than \$200 billion over the last three years, has created significant pressure to reduce and eliminate programs. Budget decisions have led to reductions in force, hiring freezes, furloughs and early retirements that have challenged service delivery. Term limitation has led to a new dynamic in state legislatures. New members are often unfamiliar with nutrition issues, especially those driven by federal policy. Election year changes compound the need for leadership development, educational opportunities and sharing state models for action.

State policymakers and their staff turn to their national associations for information and technical assistance on hunger-related issues and analysis of the impact of federal policy decisions. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the American Public Human Services

Association (APHS) and the National Governors' Association (NGA) are the major organizations of state policymakers who work on nutrition-related issues. These bipartisan national organizations have shown their commitment to ending hunger and improving the state/federal partnership to deliver vital food assistance to needy children, families and the elderly. Each has adopted policy resolutions with concrete recommendations that would improve nutrition assistance, alleviate and prevent hunger and enable people to improve their health and be more productive at work and at school.

NCSL and APHS provide technical assistance to their members and hold seminars and conference sessions to discuss food and nutrition issues in more detail. APHS represents the state administrators who manage the key programs to alleviate hunger. NCSL represents state legislators and their staff. State legislatures enact many of the laws regulating these programs and their benefits, fund these programs, provide fiscal and program oversight, respond to constituent concerns about program effectiveness and serve as community leaders and facilitators. Both organizations use insights from their street level interactions to educate federal lawmakers and administrators on the real world impacts of their policy decisions.

Both NCSL and APHS convene their membership so that critical state players can meet together to learn, gather and share best practices, foster good public policy, and identify ways to improve, enhance, and reform federal programs. One of the critical missing elements in hunger relief policy has been funding for national efforts to share state best practices. These meetings offer excellent opportunities to inform policy leaders, develop leadership capacity and share promising practices among states.

More research is also needed at the state level to find more cost-effective models across the country for food stamp outreach, childhood obesity and crossing language and cultural barriers to reach more immigrants and non-English speakers with food assistance. Another missing resource is funding for staff who can work directly with policymakers on the details of policy, funding and program changes. These are areas where NCSL and other governmental organizations can play an important role.

Indeed, a strategy to combat hunger at the national level would be remiss to not include these organizations because of the trust that state policymakers place in them for bipartisan, credible information. These organizations understand the best format to present to policymakers. Too often, information is presented to policymakers in ways they cannot absorb or act on. For example, state lawmakers need concise information with clear policy options and summaries of relevant studies or bills. Administrators and staff need more examination of systems issues – from eligibility to EBT to information systems to cross-system collaboration. Policymakers and their staff turn to their national organizations' websites for this information. Listservs, conference calls, webcasts and other new technologies have expanded the ways national organizations reach their members – especially since many states no longer approve travel to meetings due to state budget constraints.

EDUCATION CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN STATE HUNGER POLICY DECISIONS

Experience has illustrated that education can make a difference in how state officials respond to hunger. NCSL had support to educate state policymakers about immigrants and to provide technical assistance if lawmakers wanted to examine their laws and programs. In 1996, when the federal government decided to deny food stamp assistance to legal immigrants and refugees, NCSL was ready to answer complex questions for states that wanted to address the loss of the safety net. NCSL was able to assist states in designing and funding alternative programs to alleviate hunger in this population.

State legislators devised their own safety net programs for immigrants who lost federal aid. Seventeen states passed legislation providing food assistance to this population. Other states provided additional funding for emergency feeding programs, including assistance to food banks and pantries. Washington State, for example, spearheaded a “seamless service” initiative for legal immigrants made ineligible by the welfare law. The state appropriated \$65 million to purchase federal food stamps, continuing federal benefits for all legal immigrants with state funding. With assistance from NCSL, states established a collaboration with USDA to amend the FY1997 supplemental appropriations bill to grant states the option to purchase federal food stamps for immigrants made ineligible by the welfare law. Several states followed Washington’s example, while others crafted their own state programs for food stamps and/or emergency food assistance. For example, Minnesota developed “Minnesota grown” coupons at 35 percent of the federal benefit level; Montana and Massachusetts (among others) appropriated additional funds for food banks and emergency food assistance. How did they learn about these options? From the sharing of state best practices at national meetings and from requests for technical assistance from a trusted organization.

MODELS FOR ATTACKING COMPLEX PROBLEMS

Hunger relief is often addressed in a piecemeal fashion because each program, whether state or federal, has complex rules that must be administered at the state level. Even many legislators who champion these issues often need assistance in defining policy responses to hunger needs because of the intricacies of the many different programs. A comprehensive approach to educating state policymakers, advancing promising models and providing national assistance could be accomplished a number of ways. We suggest three possibilities that could be accomplished in combination or separately – a Building Capacity project, modeled after NCSL’s immigrant policy project; a national effort to improve program outreach, modeled after work with state policymakers on SCHIP; and/or funding for state-level pilot projects to improve program access.

Building Capacity

One potential project could focus on building the capacity of state policymakers to address hunger in a comprehensive way. This would be an effort modeled after the Immigrant Policy Project at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The Immigrant Policy Project, housed at NCSL, was created as a collaboration of six national organizations representing state and local government. The project's goal is to help state and local policymakers understand complex immigration issues and enhance their ability to respond to local immigration and integration challenges.

The Immigrant Policy Project has worked across public and private sectors and across disciplines to identify needs and promising practices to serve immigrants with a wide diversity of language, culture, and legal status. The Project brought together immigration and welfare experts, state and local officials, advocacy organizations, and immigrants themselves to identify key priorities for policy and programs. The networks and partnerships that resulted helped expand the base of expertise available to policymakers and provided a mechanism for sharing common challenges and possible solutions, and leading to more informed public policy decisions. This was particularly valuable as immigrants began resettling in "nontraditional" states, such as in the south and midwest, places with less experience than the "traditional" immigrant-receiving states such as California and New York.

This capacity building in the field of immigrant policy prepared state lawmakers to be effective leaders when benefits for legal immigrants and refugees were at risk during federal welfare reform and when restoration of food stamp benefits were considered by the federal government. Governors, state legislators, county officials, mayors, and administrators were well-educated about the potential harm to immigrant populations and successfully narrowed the proposed federal cuts from more than 200 programs to five. However, the final welfare bill still eliminated \$24 billion in federal benefits for legal immigrants and refugees.

State lawmakers continued to work with Congress and the Administration, advising federal officials of the effects of the food stamp cuts on states and on immigrant families. One million immigrants were estimated to lose food stamps under the 1996 welfare law, and the value of their lost benefits was estimated at \$70 million per month. A coalition of policymakers, hunger groups, and immigrant advocates reaped successes in three pieces of federal legislation. A 1998 agricultural research bill restored benefits to the elderly, disabled and children who arrived in the U.S. prior to 1996. Legislation in 1997 paved the way for states to purchase food stamps from the federal government, saving them the expense and duplication of setting up a new system. And the 2002 farm bill restored food stamps for immigrant children who entered the U.S. after 1996, legal immigrants receiving disability assistance and legal immigrants with five years residence in the U.S. Capacity building, and effective partnerships, were successful in restoring food stamps to this particularly vulnerable population.

This model could foster effective collaboration to develop hunger policy leadership expertise at the state level. Such a model could tackle the complex range of programs. It could fund activities at more than one of the national organizations serving state policymakers. It could enhance the work of hunger relief groups and service providers at the state level. It could take on projects to improve program outreach, develop papers to address specific policy solutions and foster important information sharing among key stakeholders. It could identify states willing to explore new ways to deliver services, especially if some of their expenses were supported.

Improving Outreach

States have also taken a proactive approach to benefits programs, improving outreach tailored to help specific populations learn about, apply for, and use services available under new programs. Many good examples can be found in the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), created in 1997 to expand coverage for low-income, uninsured children. States simplified application forms, employed new outreach mechanisms, and developed community-based partnerships. State also expanded access, with at least 16 states using their own funds to fill the gap in health care for legal immigrant children barred from the program by the federal welfare law. NCSL, through its health and immigrant policy staff, was able to play a key role in helping educate lawmakers, share practices among states, and identify how to draw down federal match in SCHIP, Medicaid and TANF for outreach and for language services. Conference highlighted policy choices and state models so that lawmakers could learn from each other and consider how to adapt proven methods to the experience in their own state. Papers were developed, including, *SCHIP Access for Children in Immigrant Families* and *Language Access: Helping Non-English Speakers Navigate Health and Human Services*, that concisely explained complex program changes and identified ways that states could draw down federal dollars for vulnerable populations.

States developed a variety of effective outreach methods to promote the new program. California, for example, developed partnerships with schools, clinics, tax preparers and day care centers to expand outreach and enrollment. The state funds community organizations, and uses corporate sponsorship such as drug stores, grocery stores, public transit and utilities. The application form has been shortened from 28 pages to 4, and has been translated into 10 languages. Florida improved their forms with the advice of migrant farm workers, creating a one-page, easy to read fact sheet explaining eligibility and a one-page, mail-in application, translated into Spanish and Creole. New Mexico launched a program to train "promotoras" – these are lay health education volunteers that live in the community. They provide information about health services and program eligibility, and counteract misinformation, particularly important for immigrant families fearful of adverse immigration consequences of accepting public benefits.

These creative strategies helped uninsured families take advantage of the new health care program, including families with language and cultural barriers. Key to states' success was the creation of new public-private partnerships for outreach, particularly with local grassroots intermediaries that have a "reservoir of trust" in local communities.

Creating Opportunities to Improve Access

Opportunities exist at the state government level to experiment with various public policy solutions independently and simultaneously, and for states to quickly learn from each other's experiences on what is workable and replicable. Successful state models spread to other states, and sometimes are adopted by the federal government for national application. States also benefit from "lessons learned", i.e., what not to do in reforming programs and systems.

Anti-hunger policy is fragmented across disciplines – child nutrition and WIC in the health care department, food stamps in agriculture, school lunch in education. Provide opportunities to help

state governments experiment with family-focused nutrition programs. One area particularly important to administrators and staff relates to computer and information systems. There is a long queue of changes resulting from each federal reform, whether a mandate or a state option, resulting in computer reprogramming, staff retraining and writing and printing new manuals. And mandated federal changes rank a higher priority than changes that states identify as necessary including simplification, reducing the administrative burden on applicants and agencies, and establishing uniform applications to relate information across agencies and systems.

For example, federal law and practice continues to focus on “program integrity” in the food stamps program, and quality control error rates. There is a tension between facilitating program access and addressing hunger relief that government has not yet come to terms with. Financial sanctions from the federal government for states that do not meet these rates often foster unintended consequences as states need to combat fraud and mistaken payments. While the 2002 farm bill established new outcome measures to assess program effectiveness, state administrators have difficulty navigating these sometime conflicting goals. Technical assistance in this area is needed.

States also try, under existing program rules, to coordinate the best package for a family across a range of programs, and for as long as they need. Some offer application waivers for those already found eligible for similar low-income programs; others extend transitional benefits. The biggest barriers in improving program access include: stigma about the food stamp program and other feeding programs, myths about eligibility and dislike of going to welfare office for eligibility decisions, especially among the elderly.

CONCLUSIONS

Having a group of well-educated/well-informed state elected and appointed officials who know what they can do to prevent hunger can advance anti-hunger policy both at the state and federal levels. This paper recommends that a formal effort be made to help state policymakers understand the policy issues facing nutrition assistance programs at the state and federal level. A crucial part of such an effort would be the identification of promising practices, continuing needs, and areas for reform. There is currently much to build on in terms of interest and expertise of lawmakers and administrators but few formal mechanisms to focus on hunger.

What is needed are ways for states and communities to share best practices, such as examples of effective outreach practices and to find solutions to particular enrollment barriers. An energized and educated set of elected and appointed officials would create an environment that would be conducive to working together with public, private not-for-profit and faith-based actors. A catalyst is needed to create a new commitment for a comprehensive approach to ending hunger. Energized state policymakers, especially in a time of fiscal constraints, can highlight efforts and pull community resources to work together rather than fight each other for limited public dollars.

In the Kansas Health Institute paper, *Hunger in the Heartland*, which has been embraced by Kansas state legislators of both parties, more than a dozen strategies are identified as actions that the state and other policymakers could take to tackle hunger. The strategies include food policy councils that include broad-based public and private partners, enhancing coordination between nutrition support

programs, increasing program participation, expanding program eligibility, expanding school breakfast and summer meals, limiting legal liability for food recovery activities and promotion of farm to school programs and actions to take on the issue of child obesity. Kansas legislators brought the report to NCSL and asked us how to think through some of the recommendations especially how to leverage assets at the public, private and volunteer level. This is exactly the kind of state action that the anti-hunger field would like to encourage and build on. However, translating this enthusiasm to the details of legislation, financing and implementation is the challenge.

* Sheri Steisel is Senior Director of Human Services Policy and Federal Affairs Counsel at the National Conference of State Legislatures. Sheri also directs NCSL's Human Services Committee, which has jurisdiction on food and nutrition assistance issues. Ann Morse is the Program Director of the Immigrant Policy Project at the National Conference of State Legislatures, which coordinates the work of the State and Local Coalition on Immigration.

NCSL serves the legislators and staff of the nation's 50 states, commonwealths, and territories. NCSL is a bipartisan organization that seeks to improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures; to foster interstate communication and cooperation; and to ensure states a strong cohesive voice in the federal system.