



Speech delivered by Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance Executive Director Kathy Webb, at the Food Justice Summit in Fayetteville, AR, on November 12, 2013

Thank you. Not too long ago, I heard the Executive Director of one of the Feeding America food banks tell a story about some of the kids who attend the school in her area. It was the one snow day of the year, and the school was closed. The school custodian was at the school taking care of some business when three kids came walking up the hill. He went to greet them with a big smile on his face, guessing that somehow they had missed the TV announcements that school was closed. As he shared that news, he saw their faces change, and immediately asked what was wrong. He was shocked to hear the answer from one of the kids: "but what will we eat today?" "What will we eat today??"

And although I've worked on the issue of hunger for many years, it's still hard to wrap my head around these stories and the grim statistics-that just a few years ago, almost 1 in 3 kids in Arkansas was hungry. Can you imagine that?

As the ED of the Alliance, I might like to think we can solve every problem by ourselves. But when you get right down to it, it's a lot easier to imagine ending this problem if I don't think I have to do it alone. I firmly believe that working collaboratively we can end childhood hunger in Arkansas. We can do this.

True collaboration isn't sitting down with a friend from another non-profit and saying, "Hey, let's talk about ending hunger in AR." It goes far beyond a conversation like "you have a pantry down the road; we serve free and reduced meals at school and have a weekend program; and the community garden folks can help. Collaboration is not just information sharing. If you want to make real progress on an issue it takes intentional leadership, planning, structure-and a lot of patience. Matt Kouri, who works with a lot of non-profit groups in Texas and other states, says that this work is when two or more organizations work together in a meaningful, well-defined, and deliberate manner, by investing time, energy, and resources to accomplish a set of shared objectives that are mutually beneficial to advancing the missions and the organizations involved, and the objectives are more likely to be achieved together than alone.

Other researchers said the keys to impactful collaboration involve four core operating principles:

1. Commitment to long-term involvement.
2. Involvement of key stakeholders across sectors.
3. Shared data to set agendas and improve results.
4. Engagement of community members as substantive partners.

We have all these organizations, in a relatively small market, often competing for the same dollars, as well as for news coverage and the same volunteers. And we all know that were we in the private sector, we'd likely have more staff filling each of our roles. How can any of us take on a new project, even though directly related to our mission, that will take time and focus, that can be both complex and ambiguous, that requires a different set of leadership skills, and is ripe for tension between competitors? Not all boards want their leaders to engage collaboratively.

But you know what? We can't solve this problem alone. We had one out of three kids hungry, and overall we were rated the hungriest state in the country; number 1 worst. That is simply unacceptable. Some people just don't believe it.

It was unacceptable to Governor Mike Beebe. It was unacceptable to the Alliance, and the Food Bank and Department of Human Services and the Department of Education. It was unacceptable to business leaders and faith-based leaders and philanthropic groups.

With the help of our national partner, Share Our Strength, we sat down together and deliberatively formed a collaboration table. There were representatives at the table from groups who hadn't spoken in years. There were state agencies, DHS, the Health Department and AR Department of Education; other non-profits who worked on the same issue as the Alliance. There were partners from businesses, including Tyson and Walmart, from the Governor's Office, from the city of Little Rock, interested individuals, faith-based groups, Midwest Dairy Council and more.

We approached this collaboration with rigor, continuously defining terms, expectations, authority, goals, and more. We looked for leaders within the group who could think long term, who know how to resolve conflict. We sought to make clear that the goal was bigger than any one group, and often, we had to set egos aside.

Our goal: to end childhood hunger in Arkansas by 2015. There were three key components in the strategy to get us there:

1. Improve access to public and private programs that provide food to families and their children who need and aren't receiving it;
2. Strengthen community infrastructure and systems for getting healthy food to children; and

3. Improve families' knowledge about available programs, healthy food choices and how to get the most from their limited resources.

In order to know where we were, we did a baseline of where AR stood in the core goals.

We found that only a little over 70% of those families eligible for SNAP were enrolled. We also learned that of the almost half million people served by the Alliance food banks, less than 30% were enrolled in SNAP.

We believed hungry kids weren't getting fed during the summer, and it was even worse than we thought. Only 300+ sites in the entire state served summer meals: 10% of the kids who were eligible got summer meals.

Even worse, only 48 sites participated in after school meal programs. And only 44 out of every 100 kids who participated in the National School Lunch Program participated in the School Breakfast Program.

With this data in hand and our general goals in place, we set specific goals for 2011, 2012, and 2013, to increase participation in all these programs.

We set a goal for increasing AR participation rate in SNAP by 5%. And we set goals for increasing breakfast by starting pilot programs for breakfast in the classroom and we set goals for adding summer and after school sites.

The collaborative model was key to the early improvements.

First, it was imperative that everyone at the table was focused on the same goals. Second, it was critical that we measured our progress the same way, and third, that public and private partnerships become truly that—partnerships.

We began to share data to both set the agenda and improve results. To create the kind of large scale impact we sought, an increasing cross-sector alignment and learning among many organizations was critical.

Two additional components that must be stressed for successful outcomes are a mutually-reinforcing plan and activities and communication. Now I'd bet that I'm not the only person in the room who has said at least once that it's easier if I do it myself, or at least I'll bet you've thought it. Communication takes work. It takes time. It's hard. But to succeed on the scale we hope to, it is a critical component.

As in all non-profit work, celebrating victories is important. Some of the policy issues and systemic changes we work on take years to become a reality.

After year one, the entire collaborating table was able to rejoice in the achievement of reaching all of our first year goals: SNAP enrollment did increase by 5%, summer meals increased by 16% and over 100 new sites were added. After school sites increased by 200%. And the breakfast pilots were successful, meaning that a focused effort could now be made now to increase those sites.

What has changed at the table since we started?

1. There is more buy in from groups that historically compete for donors and volunteers because there is more trust.
2. The shared values and goals are more prominent in discussions.
3. The commonalities are more of the focus. I recent sat at a table with two groups who definitely compete for the same resources, but who have both been engaged in this campaign. We met to discuss a non-campaign related program, and shared data and information that had previously been closely held. We agreed going forward to continue to share information so both programs could grow stronger, with the end result being that children will get more nutritious food.
4. New partners have come to the table-county judges, members of the legislature, city officials, the public health community, school nurses, and more.

As of today, we served over 4 million meals this past summer, an increase of 2.5 million since we started tracking in 2009. Sites recruited by the Alliance field team increased 239% over goal- we've almost tripled sites, from 300 to almost 900. This summer when deadlines were approaching to get sites approved, our team worked so closely with DHS staff, I wasn't sure who worked for the campaign and who worked for DHS. Folks worked until late at night, with the collaboration being motivational and driven by a desire to succeed. We have "yes we can do it" folks at the table, and that's what you need. Recently, the Governor pulled the teams from the Alliance, DHS and ADE together, to celebrate the success of summer. The USDA contacted DHS and said there was a problem with the numbers from AR-they couldn't be right. When we assured them the numbers were right, USDA sent a team here to see how we did it. More recently, the Governor approved 11 new positions at DHS for this program so we can institutionalize this success.

While afterschool sites still lag behind summer, they have increased by almost 200% since the initial increase. YTD, we have reached an additional 15,000 kids, 300% of the 2013 goal. After school snacks have grown from 86,000 when to campaign started to 4 million YTD; after school suppers, from 569,000 to 3.8 million YTD. Because of the successes, SOS has made almost \$45,000 in grants available to new sponsors.

In 2012, 60 new breakfast sites were added, YTD, 135 new schools have joined the alternative breakfast program, a 50% growth over a strong 2012! During test weeks, schools send a note home with kids encouraging parents to feed their child a good breakfast; if we know how important that is, doesn't it seem like it would be a good idea every day?

Every barrier that has been offered to this program can be eliminated if we can get someone to try it for a week. And for schools that need help purchasing thermal bags, rolling trash cans, or kiosks for grab 'n go breakfasts, our national partner has enabled us to distribute almost \$250,000 in grants last year and this year and Midwest Dairy has funded a position based at the Alliance and working with our "All about Breakfast" Director. What we see is less tardiness, time saved because the kids do settle down more quickly, fewer trips to the school nurse and principal, fewer absences-and we have data showing improved test results. Friends, this is great news for everyone! Retired school superintendents, former school food service directors, the ADE, Midwest Dairy, and the Alliance teamed up to make this happen. And because of the involvement with the legislature, a bill passed last session to allocate additional money for more breakfast programs-102 schools applied!

One of the core components of the campaign to end childhood hunger I mentioned earlier was improving families' knowledge about health programs, healthy food choices and how to get the most from limited resources. Our Cooking Matters and Cooking Matters at the Store programs are now statewide, working with 70+ partners, empowering families on a tight budget to develop the skills, tools, and confidence they need to make systemic changes in their eating and shopping habits. Families who have these skills can be 50% less food insecure spending the same dollars.

While these programs are data driven and evidence based, we see the pride graduates have as they complete the 6 week CM class and they hone their shopping skills. I've taken pictures of empty plates after Moms assured me the kids wouldn't eat the veggies, I've seen graduates talk proudly about their weight loss, and whisper to volunteer, "I'm doing this for myself and for her" as she pointed to her young child, who was already suffering from obesity because of not eating the right food, and learned about graduates who formed a walking club, to continue practicing what they have learned. We talk about gaining confidence through these programs-evaluators have gone into participant's homes and have seen the graduation certificates framed and hung in living rooms and kitchens-for some participants, this is their first diploma!

Confidence is a game changer!

It's a game changer not only for the kids and families who are empowered through these programs; it's a game changer for all of the groups and individuals at the collaborative table. Collaboration is hard, but it works.

Most successful collaboration shares five core elements:

1. Shared vision and agenda, where leaders from government, nonprofit, philanthropy, and business develop measurable community-wide goals. And a clear roadmap to achieving them.
2. Effective leadership and governance, with highly respected leaders at the helm who are viewed as honest, neutral brokers, and who attract and retain a diverse group of large and small organizations to guide the collaboration forward.
3. Alignment of resources toward what works, where nonprofits, government, philanthropy and business work together to target efforts.
4. Dedicated staff capacity. And appropriate structure to provide the facilitation, data analyses, and administration for success.
5. Sufficient funding to maintain staff and invest in the strategic priorities of the group.

We don't know yet where we'll be in 2015, if our goal to match all available resources with the people who need them and programs can be effective, and all of the systemic changes we are looking at will occur.

We don't know if we will have ended childhood hunger in AR, but we do know we've moved from worst to 6th worst-which is huge; that USDA looks at AR as a model; and that other states call us and ask us how we're doing it. And when you sit with an 8 year old at a summer site and you ask her how her lunch is, and her answer is, "I'm just happy to have a meal," you know you are going in the right direction, the hard work is paying off and you know you can't stop now.

Thank you so much.