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## NATIONAL COMMISSION HEARS ABOUT HUNGER IN ARKANSAS

**LITTLE ROCK, AR (May 21, 2015)** –On Tuesday, May 19th the National Commission on Hunger held public hearings to address hunger and food insecurity in Arkansas. After visiting Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School to observe the successful Breakfast in the Classroom program, the panel heard invited testimony from local leaders in the anti-hunger community about how USDA funds might be more effectively used to fight hunger in Arkansas.

Kathy Webb, Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance executive director, spoke about the barriers of transportation, inflexible regulatory requirements and the diverse distribution of poverty in urban and rural Arkansas that effect our ability to provide children in need with adequate nutrition in the summer through the USDA Summer Food Service Program. “Only 22 percent of eligible children in the state are successfully getting the meals they need when school is out of session. That’s unacceptable. It’s time to improve the way we feed kids in the summertime. Right now Congress is considering the reauthorization of child nutrition programs. This is a critical time to ensure our voices are heard and Congress takes action to help feed more children in the summertime. By giving communities more options and building more flexibility into the summer meals program, we can make the program run more effectively and efficiently in our cities, suburbs and rural communities,” said Webb.

Christie Jordan, executive director of the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas, reminded commission members that while the food provided under the federal commodities program is crucial in combatting hunger, the funds appropriated to pay for the actual distribution is inadequate. This lack of full funding for distribution often means food banks have to shoulder the financial burden. Jordan asked that Congress remedy this situation so that those who are called on to distribute commodities are less likely to become eligible recipients of those food items.

Arkansas Foodbank Executive Director Rhonda Sanders addressed the Commission regarding the inability of charitable organizations to meet the tremendous need for food saying, “The Arkansas Foodbank is working diligently to be a part of the solution to hunger. In no way do we feel that the Arkansas Foodbank or the charitable food system is the complete answer. While it is clear that food banks are no longer just providing emergency food, we still have the capacity to provide only a limited amount of food to those in need. Clients utilize our resources to fill a gap, not their entire pantry. We provide approximately 5% of all the assistance to families in need.”

The Committee also heard from Representative Charlotte Vining Douglas (R-75) about the important successes we are seeing from implementation of Breakfast-After-the-Bell programs that are increasing the number of Arkansas school children who are able to eat a nutritious breakfast as part of the school day. Douglas pointed to the improvements in attendance, concentration and health of students in schools that have adopted alternative breakfast delivery programs such as Breakfast in the Classroom, Second Chance and Grab & Go breakfast.

The topic of senior hunger received a great deal of attention from speakers. Representatives from the Area Centers on Aging, the Arkansas Department of Human Services and AARP all referenced the fact that Arkansas leads the nation in senior hunger. Among the many recommendations made were that benefit levels for seniors be raised to make it possible for them to buy enough food to meet their needs on fixed incomes that are stressed by pharmaceutical, utility and housing costs. Currently senior benefits average only approximately \$16 per month.

The consequences of food insecurity on children were the focus of Dr. Patrick Casey of Arkansas Children's Hospital (ACH). Dr. Casey discussed negative mental, physical and developmental effects that lack of adequate nutrition has on children, emphasizing that the cost of making sure children receive nutritious food more than offsets the cost of recurring treatment for hunger related conditions. Arkansas Children's Hospital began participating in the USDA Summer Food Service Program in 2014 and was able to provide hundreds of free summer meals a day to children who were on the ACH campus. With the cooperation of USDA, ACH was able to expand the free meal program beyond the summer months to help feed non-patient children year-round. This new USDA-approved program, the Children's Medical Feeding & Nutrition Program, is now a model for other hospitals around the nation and Casey encouraged the Commission to recommend the program.

The 10-member National Commission on Hunger is a congressionally appointed bi-partisan commission charged with developing innovative reforms in both public and private food assistance programs to reduce or eliminate very low food security. The recommendations are meant to include ways to more effectively use federal programs and funds. As part of its information gathering process, the Commission is conducting public hearings across the country in advance of their mandated report to Congress later this year.

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**About The Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance**

Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, lead partner in Arkansas for the No Kid Hungry campaign, is a non-profit collaborative network of more than 480 hunger relief organizations across Arkansas. Our founding members include the Arkansas Foodbank in Little Rock, the Food Bank of Northeast Arkansas in Jonesboro, Harvest Texarkana Regional Food Bank in Texarkana, Food Bank of North Central Arkansas in Norfolk, Northwest Arkansas Food Bank in Bethel Heights and River Valley Regional Food Bank in Fort Smith. The Alliance is dedicated to reducing hunger through direct relief, education and advocacy. We invite you to visit [www.ARhungeralliance.org](http://www.ARhungeralliance.org) for details on hunger relief programs, donor and volunteer opportunities.