



Roundtable Discussion on Hunger

Hosted By:

Congresswoman Scanlon with Congressman McGovern

Loree D. Jones, Chief Executive Officer

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## Introduction

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Good afternoon, Congresswoman Scanlon, Congressman McGovern, and Congressman Evans. Thank you for inviting me to speak about the issue of hunger in our region, highlight the innovative work we are doing to address this crisis, and offer recommendations to advance our shared goal of ending hunger.

I am Loree Jones, Chief Executive Officer of Philabundance, a hunger relief organization serving five counties in Pennsylvania and four counties in New Jersey. We are part of the Feeding America national network of over 200 food banks and work closely with Feeding Pennsylvania and their food bank partners across the state. At Philabundance, our mission is to alleviate hunger today while we work to end hunger for good. We are dedicated not only to meeting the immediate need through emergency food provision, but also to addressing the root causes of hunger. We understand that emergency food is not going to solve hunger or poverty, but it is one piece of a much larger puzzle. Philabundance is committed to reducing hunger and the reliance on emergency food.

I began at Philabundance just over one year ago. I started at the height a pandemic that thrust the long-standing issue of food insecurity even more into the public eye. I have seen first-hand the dedication of our staff, volunteers, and donors, but I have also seen the increased need for food. We distributed 55 million pounds of food in 2020, nearly double the amount we distributed in 2019. We served thousands of people throughout our nine-county service area, despite supply-chain interruptions, added health precautions for employees, and imposed restrictions for the volunteers who stepped up to help. To battle the spike in food insecurity, we launched new ways to provide food, including drive-thru distributions at the Phillies' Citizens Bank Park, home deliveries to seniors, and meals to restaurant workers. We invested millions of dollars in vehicles, refrigeration, technology, electrical upgrades, waste management, and other equipment for our agency partners.

Innovation was key to effectively responding to COVID-19, and innovation will be key going forward as we recover from the pandemic and accompanying economic crisis. We cannot go back to business as usual. We know that the people we serve are going to be among the last to recover from the economic fallout of the pandemic. Food insecurity will remain at heightened levels, even with COVID cases decreasing and jobs returning. The challenges we seek to address are complex and deep rooted. The response must be innovative, collaborative, equitable, and grounded in systemic change. We are living through a critical moment in history. Together, we have the opportunity to end hunger for good.

## Philabundance Background

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At Philabundance we strive to ensure equitable and broad access to nutritious food and resources to help all our neighbors lead healthy, active lives. Philabundance was founded in 1984 with the simple belief that no person or child should go hungry while healthy food goes to waste. Our mission is to drive hunger from our communities today and to end hunger for good. In addition to food distribution, we strive to reduce food waste, increase accessibility to nutritious meals, and tackle the root causes of hunger through programs



*A Philabundance agency partner picking up free product at an Agency Hub event.*

such as the Philabundance Community Kitchen and Ending Hunger For Good. In partnership with more than 350 agencies, we provide nutritious food to those in need in our service area, which includes Philadelphia, Montgomery, Bucks, Chester, and Delaware counties in Pennsylvania and Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Salem counties in New Jersey. In no area, no county, do we not see a need – and an increased need at this time.

### Philabundance Food Distributions

Philabundance provides free food to our agency network in three different ways:

- **Produce Deliveries** –Philabundance delivers large amounts of produce and perishable goods directly to agency partners each week
- **Perishable Food Hubs** – Philabundance provides multiple pick up locations in our service area where our agency partners can pick up perishable product each week
- **Agency Express** – Philabundance has a system where our agency partners can order non-perishable products to either pick up or be delivered

Philabundance participates in a number of government programs that provide food:

- The **Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)** provides USDA-donated food to low-income seniors through monthly senior boxes. Philabundance packs and distributes these boxes to strategically chosen locations. Boxes contain approximately 30 pounds of canned and boxed food including vegetables, fruit, juice, pasta, milk, cereal, canned meat, and a non-meat protein. We provide 4,500 boxes per month.
- The **Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) Bonus** provides Philabundance with access to commodity food purchased by the USDA that we make available to eligible households
- The **State Food Purchase Program (SFPP)** and the **Pennsylvania Agriculture Surplus System (PASS)** are two state specific nutrition programs that provide organizations like Philabundance with funding to purchase food. The PASS program also supports PA farmers as the funds are used to reimburse them for donated products.

In addition, our agency partners and others can participate in the following programs:

- **Philabundance Community Kitchen Mission Meals** are ready-to-eat or frozen meals made at our community kitchen to be distributed to people who are unhoused, seniors, or families who need meals.
- **BackPack** provides free, nutritious, and easy-to-prepare supplemental meals for families with kids at select member agency sites. This year, Philabundance is partnering with Kids Against Hunger Philadelphia to provide four shelf-stable meal packs in every Backpack. Each meal pack provides six prepared servings, for a total of 24 servings.
- **Feed Our Food Workers** is a partnership with the Garces Foundation and 6ABC to provide meals to restaurant workers who have been impacted by the pandemic.
- **Philabundance Senior Meal Delivery Program** delivers prepared meals directly to seniors so they do not have to visit a pantry or another agency for food.

Philabundance operates by primarily distributing donated, purchased, and rescued product. This allows our food to be distributed without any barriers. To receive our non-government funded food, the people we serve do not need to prove they are people or in need. They simply need to show up and can be provided nutritious food.

At Philabundance, we are committed to centering the people we serve. To us, that means it is not enough to say we distributed over 55 million pounds of food this past year. We must understand whether those pounds were the food people wanted and were distributed in a way that truly works for them. “Right food, right time, right way,” we say. We are committed to adjusting to meet the needs of people and are engaging our agency partners in discussions about how we can better serve people at times that work for them, in ways that are dignified, and with foods they want to eat.

### Food Insecurity

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*A line of cars awaiting a food distribution.*

The reason organizations like Philabundance are necessary is because of incredibly high rates of food insecurity. Defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a lack of access to enough food for a healthy and active life, food insecurity is a pervasive issue that impacts the health, well-being, and success of those who face it. At its core, food insecurity is hunger; it's when people are not able to afford the food they need.

Before the pandemic, there was a sweeping epidemic of hunger in this country. In Pennsylvania, over 1.4 million people faced food insecurity during 2018. That's nearly 11 percent of Pennsylvanians. In a country, and especially a state, with so much farming, agriculture, and resources, we still could not ensure everyone was fed. We know that the high rates of hunger are directly linked to high rates of poverty. Hunger is an issue of resources and access, worsened by the many existing obstacles people face: low-wage jobs, part-time hours, transportation challenges, the high cost of childcare and housing, and language barriers. When wages are too low or jobs are hard to find, it becomes impossible for families to meet the ever-rising costs and put food on the table.

Prior to the pandemic a national report estimated that hunger costs our country over \$160 billion in increased health care costs, lost productivity, lost educational attainment.<sup>1</sup> Hunger is costly and critical investment is needed to address the need and underlying causes. We have enough food but need the policies to ensure everyone has access to that food.

### COVID-19

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Then came a global pandemic. COVID-19 has had an immediate and devastating effect on the communities we serve. Food insecurity in our service area rose sharply, with agencies in our network reporting a 60 percent increase in the number of people they served – 40 percent of which were people

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<sup>1</sup> Bread for the World, The Cost of Hunger, <http://www.hungerreport.org/costofhunger/>.

using the emergency food system for the first time. Feeding America is projecting that nationally more than 42 million people, including 13 million children, may experience food insecurity in 2021 due to COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>

Increasing hunger is happening across the entire nation, with people of color and households with children being disproportionately affected. In Pennsylvania, most counties saw a 4 percent increase in food insecurity. Delaware County went from 8.5 percent of people experiencing food insecurity in 2019 to a projected 12 percent in 2020. Philadelphia County saw a rise from 14.4 percent in 2019 to a projected 18.7 percent in 2020. For Pennsylvania’s children the pandemic has been even worse. In more than half of the state, the child food insecurity rate is over 20 percent.

To meet this additional need, Philabundance had to pivot. We had to be more creative in how we acquired food. We had to be ready to respond quickly to a request for a distribution or to a government program. Most importantly, we had to listen to the community to understand how we could serve them best. This meant delivering our senior boxes instead of asking seniors to come and pick them up. This is a change we are working to keep even after COVID-19 as the boxes are heavy and can be difficult for seniors to bring home. By listening and being willing to pivot we can do better.

Philabundance’s Impact - 2019 vs. 2020			
Pounds Distributed to Our Neighbors			
	2019	2020	Increase
January	2,224,404	2,682,302	21%
February	2,141,320	3,143,489	47%
March	2,329,458	3,135,477	35%
April	2,358,815	4,244,203	80%
May	2,381,835	5,475,501	130%
June	2,358,646	7,093,272	201%
July	2,136,846	6,411,057	200%
August	2,229,189	5,372,076	141%
September	2,233,083	6,328,567	183%
October	2,647,827	4,674,526	77%
November	2,744,169	3,579,381	30%
December	2,227,279	3,830,875	72%
<b>Total</b>	<b>28,012,871</b>	<b>55,970,726</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Food Should Not Be Wasted

While millions go hungry, 40 percent of the food produced in this country goes to waste.<sup>3</sup>

In total, the U.S. spends \$218 billion each year growing, manufacturing, processing, distributing, and disposing of food that is never eaten. That amounts to 52 million tons for food sent to landfill each year.

Philabundance was founded as a food rescue organization, a tactic we continue today. Food rescue means working with retail partners to save perfectly good food they are throwing away to make space for newer items or working with farmers to support them in donating product they cannot sell. At Philabundance we believe that no food should go to waste while people are hungry, and it is still

<sup>2</sup> Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap, The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity, <https://feedingamericaaction.org/resources/state-by-state-resource-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/>

<sup>3</sup> United States Environmental Protection Agency, International Efforts on Wasted Food Recovery <https://www.epa.gov/international-cooperation/international-efforts-wasted-food-recovery>

shocking to me the amount of food we are able to recover and provide to people just by saving perfectly good food from going in the trash.

## Innovation and Collaboration

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In addition to our work to relieve hunger today, Philabundance has made a commitment to ending hunger for good. Hunger does not happen in a silo. Necessities like food, housing, income, education, and access to primary and preventive healthcare are intertwined. Eradicating hunger demands a holistic approach that recognizes and addresses the root causes of food insecurity, including poverty and institutional racism.

Philabundance aims to pair food with other interventions that address social determinants of health, like housing and education, to collaboratively and holistically improve overall health in our communities. We know that the majority, over 70 percent, of what determines a person's health and lifespan has less to do with genetics and direct healthcare and more to do with the social and economic conditions in which they live. By partnering with other organizations that provide these types of interventions, Philabundance can be part of a movement to increase stability and long-term food security in the communities we serve. We do this through our innovative initiatives such as the Philabundance Community Kitchen (PCK) and Ending Hunger For Good.

PCK is a culinary arts and life skills training program that began more than 20 years ago. PCK trains people who are low- to no-income in a 16-week culinary vocational program. When we began PCK, we were committed to making it as accessible as possible, so the program has very low barriers to entry. People applying for the program must pass reading and writing tests. For anyone who does not pass, our staff will work with those who are interested to study and take those tests again. Students are required to be at class on time and prepared, but any student facing challenges will receive staff support to give them the best chance to be successful. The PCK team has built a program that truly meets people where they are today to help them move forward, and we have seen the success of this model. The program has an 80 percent job placement rate upon graduation with students starting at a salary of over \$12 an hour. We are striving for even better, and working on additional training and support to increase earnings. The innovation for our PCK program really comes from listening to the community and our students. The program is constantly evolving and changing. Each class brings new dynamics and needs and our team has the humility to understand they may have to change their approach to meet that class where they are.



*Students at Philabundance Community Kitchen*

The work with PCK helped to begin Philabundance's Ending Hunger For Good initiative, where we are committed to bringing together partners so we can face challenges head on. We believe that collaboration is key, and thus programs must work together to be successful and have maximum impact. As part of this work, Philabundance launched Sharswood THRIVE: Community by Design in 2020 Sharswood is a neighborhood in Philadelphia which holds some of the highest poverty, un-and-under employment, and food insecurity in Philadelphia. Sharswood THRIVE seeks to fundamentally change the way people seek and receive support services, with the goal of increasing the stability and economic

mobility of Sharswood community members. This is done by pairing food assistance with other critical services. We promote a comprehensive safety-net system approach that not only provides stability services such as housing and healthcare but also economic mobility empowerment through workforce development, home ownership, and financial literacy training. Sharswood THRIVE is a multi-year project carried out in collaboration with partner community organizations. We aim to create a scalable model that can be implemented in other communities.

Building on this important work, this summer Ending Hunger For Good will begin implementing the More than Food framework in several food pantries across Philabundance’s service area. More than Food is a proven framework for building capacity in food pantries to more effectively address the root causes of food insecurity. It enables food pantries to go beyond traditional food distribution to holistically address social needs, including hunger, employment and housing security, and physical and mental health. Through individualized case management and workshops, individuals will be connected to the services they need to achieve stability and thrive. When hunger is the problem, the solution must be more than providing food. It is our hope that moving forward, more policies and programs that aim to end hunger will take a holistic approach that addresses people’s multifaceted needs in tandem.

### Philabundance Ending Hunger For Good Programs

By pairing food with interventions provided by other community organizations that address social determinants of health, Philabundance aims to increase stability and long-term overall food security in the communities we serve.



**Philabundance Community Kitchen (PCK):** PCK is a 16-week culinary vocational training program which has been transforming the lives of women and men with low-to-no income since 2000. PCK promotes the self-sufficiency of its students by preparing them for and connecting them to work in the food service industry, while simultaneously allowing them to give back by preparing needed meals for those in need.

**Sharswood THRIVE:** The overall goal is to create a scalable model combining multiple services in order to meaningfully and measurably increase stability and economic mobility of Sharswood community members over a three to five-year period. The collaborative aims to ensure that existing, returning and future residents of Sharswood will live peacefully, prosperously, and as a cohesive community for generations to come.

**More than Food:** More than Food is a bold initiative to end hunger by empowering food pantries to go beyond traditional food distribution to holistically address social needs, including hunger, employment and housing security, and physical and mental health. Through individualized case management and workshops, individuals are connected to the services they need to achieve stability and thrive.

**Health Partners Plan (HPP) Initiative:** The goal is to increase long-term stability in communities that Philabundance and HPP both serve by providing home delivery meals and produce to households referred by HPP. Philabundance provides the food and meals and works with another organization, Food Connect, to make the deliveries.

As we are at Bartram's Gardens today, it is fitting to mention one more collaboration -- Philabundance is partnering with the Philadelphia Horticultural Society (PHS) on their Harvest 2020 Initiative, which helps support people in underserved communities to grow and share food. PHS creates community growing and learning spaces by repurposing Philadelphia Parks and Recreation spaces, vacant lots, front yards, and other underutilized land to create community food growing spaces. The program also connects community gardeners with local food pantries to donate excess produce. Philabundance is investing in the Harvest 2020 Initiative, and PHS will provide technical support to Philabundance agencies who want to establish their own community gardens.

The innovative programs Philabundance is working to implement are all about partnership and collaboration. We know that absolutely key to innovation is having diverse people around the table - diversity in race, gender, background, socio-economic status, viewpoint, and more. At the center of this work must be people who have lived experience with the issues at hand. The people most impacted must be included in the decision-making process. Without their expertise, any solutions will come up short. If we are looking to combat hunger we need to speak with people who have waited in line at food pantries, who know what it is like to fill out a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application, and who have made the impossible choice between paying their rent or putting food on the table. This goes for organizations like Philabundance, as well as for policymakers.

At Philabundance, innovation has meant shifting our approach to meet the needs of the moment. We had to do this in response to COVID-19, adapting to meet the changing needs of the people we serve. Innovation does not need to be complicated or monumental. We believe innovation can be as simple as asking people what they want and need, and working to close those gaps. For example, when people do not have enough money to meet their basic needs, direct cash assistance may be the best response -- an approach more and more organizations are taking to address poverty. We must listen to, learn from, and ultimately center the people we serve in our work. While that may not sound like innovation it is innovative in that too often the voice of the people we serve is not heard or considered. By centering that voice, can lead to not only innovative solutions but solutions that will have a higher likelihood of success.

### Policy Recommendations

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Hunger is a solvable issue. As a nation we have enough food to feed everyone, but too many people lack the resources to be able to access that food. We need the political will to make policies and systemic changes that remove barriers and help people get the food they need. As we have come to say, while there is a vaccine against COVID, there is no vaccine against hunger.

Below are federal policy recommendations I hope we can work together to achieve:

**Continue Support for TEFAP:** We are grateful to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Congress for supporting critical investments in our nation's charitable food system. We applaud the USDA's \$1 billion investment, which includes \$500 million for food purchases through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), \$400 million for states to purchase local foods to distribute to food banks, and \$100 million for states to fund transportation and storage capacity and infrastructure

support. These investments will greatly help organizations like Philabundance do the work that we do, and make a meaningful difference for the people we serve. We ask that programs like TEFAP will continue to receive heightened support for years to come, as we know the economic consequences of the pandemic will be long-lasting, and that recovery will be slowest for the people hit the hardest. While progress is being made, there is much work to be done.

**Extend 15% SNAP Increase** - SNAP is the nation's first line of defense against hunger, providing benefits that are timely, targeted, and temporary. We need continued and expanded SNAP investments now more than ever. SNAP is an economic multiplier, infusing money into local economies. SNAP is vital to the individuals and families who were already food insecure, as well as the millions of newly unemployed individuals during the pandemic. Every dollar spent in SNAP benefits helps generate between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity. Strengthening SNAP by extending an increase in benefits by at least 15 percent until the economy is recovered and beyond would help us reach that goal and ensure people facing hunger have access to the meals they need. The charitable food system cannot do this alone. Prior to the pandemic for every meal provided by our food banks, SNAP provided nine – there is no way that our network can make up for the unparalleled strength of SNAP to increase food security and stimulate local economies.

**Replace Thrifty Food Plan with Low-Cost Food Plan** - SNAP's biggest weakness is that benefits are not adequate to get most families through the whole month, let alone to allow them to buy the foods needed for a quality diet. Benefits are inadequate, in part, because they are based on the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan. The USDA's Low-Cost Food Plan is a much more appropriate basis for SNAP allotments. Switching to the Low-Cost Food Plan would improve the health and well-being of millions of low-income Americans. We support replacing the Thrifty Food Plan with the Low-Cost Food Plan in order to provide more adequate allotments for SNAP beneficiaries.

**Expand SNAP Eligibility** – Many people who experience food insecurity are not eligible for nutrition assistance. According to Feeding America, 50% of people who experience food insecurity are above the income limit for SNAP (130% of the Federal Poverty Line), and 31% are above the income limit for other federal nutrition programs such as WIC and school meals (185% of the Federal Poverty Line).<sup>4</sup> That is a significant portion of food insecure households that only have the emergency food system to rely on. This speaks to the need to greatly expand eligibility for federal nutrition programs, as well as continue to strengthen the charitable food network.

**Extend Pandemic-EBT and Child Nutrition Flexibilities** - The Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program allows states to provide resources on an EBT card, or through a system similar to SNAP, to participants in free and reduced-price lunch programs when child nutrition programs are closed. This critical program should be extended and strengthened to allow meal resources to be provided during summer breaks and for future school closings when meals are not otherwise available through school and childcare settings. Additionally, nationwide child nutrition waivers issued in 2020 have been critical to helping programs continue operating during the pandemic. The authority for those waivers should be extended to allow programs to better meet the needs of families.

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<sup>4</sup> Feeding America, Food Insecurity in the United States Before COVID-19, <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>

***Create A White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Hunger*** - We support Congressman McGovern's call for a substantive, policy-focused White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Hunger to create the roadmap to end hunger by 2030 -- a goal set by the United Nations. We need to have a holistic conversation at the national level on how we can truly work toward ending hunger. We appreciate the Congressman's call that this Conference include not only government and other officials but also people who have experienced hunger first hand.

## Conclusion

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Thirty-five years ago, Philabundance began because one woman saw a problem in her community and wanted to do something about it. She saw food going to waste while people struggled with hunger. She did not ignore the problem or wait for someone else to take care of it but rather stepped up herself. She did something that seemed obvious but proved to be innovative. She took excess food from restaurants and retailers and brought it to pantries, shelters, and other places where people came for food. With this one act she started something. She began building toward an organization that today feeds hundreds of thousands of people and moves millions of pounds of food.

I bring this up today not just to tout our founder, Pam Rainey Lawler, but to say that this spirit of transformation and innovation is needed to address the problems we face today. It is the same spirit we see in our agency partners who hustle to feed their communities, our volunteers who show up each week to move boxes and pack food, and our government contacts who are always looking for policies and program that can make a difference. We need this spirit of collaboration and innovation in all that we do. We need to open to new ideas and new ways to tackle the enormous issues before us. It may mean starting small but each step forward will lead us to a better future. No longer can we simply wait for someone else to step up – we must start with tangible change today. I stand ready to work with each of you to a brighter future.

I want to thank you for considering my testimony today. My Philabundance colleagues and our partner agencies are available to answer your questions or to schedule a visit. We as an organization are eager to and look forward to working with you and your colleagues to find solutions to end hunger for good.