

Testimony: House Rules Committee Roundtable

December 10, 2021

Melissa Sobolik, CEO, Great Plains Food Bank

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Cole, members of the committee and fellow panelists. It is an absolute privilege to be with you today to shed some light on the often hidden issue of rural hunger.

I grew up on a farm outside of the small town, Courtenay, ND. My parents farmed small grains with my uncle and grandpa. I grew up PROUD of my rural, farming background; my family was growing food to feed the world. How could you not be proud of that? Sure, there were hard times...but I never went hungry. Only much later in my life did I find out I received reduced price school lunches.

After graduating, in my small class of 8, I attended Concordia College in Moorhead, MN. Through all 4 years, I worked 1 to 2 jobs. I thought that was normal and that I was a typical, struggling college student.

The first job I sought out was with the college catering department...honestly, because I knew I would get a leftover meal at the end of my shift.

I also had an off campus job and remember how excited I would get when coworkers would bring in baked goods to share, often sticking extras into my bag. In that moment, I never thought of myself as food insecure or hungry – this was just my reality.

Looking back, I see I was really good at hiding it. I never threw away an empty cereal or mac and cheese box. When they were empty, I'd close the boxes back up and put them in my cupboard; so that when family or friends came over and they'd look in my kitchen they wouldn't know that anything was wrong. And I never thought anything was wrong. Eventually at the recommendation of a family member, I applied for and received SNAP benefits.

I haven't shared these personal stories before – they were a moment in my life where I did what I had to do. It was survival, not intentional. It was a temporary situation, not my identity. To this day, call it prairie pride or something else, I never considered myself a food insecure person, even though by definition I was.

And I think that's one of the reasons **hunger hides in plain sight in rural communities**. We are proud. We don't let it define us or beat us. **We grow food to feed the world, so how can we be hungry at the same time?** We have family and friends and neighbors who will help pick us up when we need it most.

That's what I see and hear from those that I have the honor to serve in my role as CEO of the Great Plains Food Bank.

We are the only food bank in the entire state of North Dakota and Clay County, Minnesota. In our 38 years, we have recovered surplus that would otherwise go to waste and got it into the hands of those who need it through a network of charitable feeding programs and direct service programs.

Pre COVID, we served 102,000 people with 12.7 million meals. In 2020, we served 50% more people, a record of 153,495 individuals, that's 1 in 6 North Dakotans who needed food assistance; half of them being children and seniors.

COVID had detrimental impacts on rural economies. In many small towns, there are only a handful of businesses...so if your hours got cut or you lost your job...there simply wasn't anywhere else for you to go. Or, if one person had COVID, the entire staff was quarantined. Which may have meant that the only grocery store for 60 miles was closed. And because rural communities are so close, they go to the same school, church, post office, when COVID hit one person in the community – it affected the entire town.

We at the Great Plains Food Bank operate under the philosophy that there is “no one-size-fits-all approach” to ending hunger. What works in urban areas may not work in rural or remote areas. We had to get creative delivering services and food during COVID.

We operated drive-through, contactless, mobile food pantries, we put food pantries in clinics or schools – sometimes the only infrastructure in the communities, we are piloting mailing food boxes to homebound veterans and working with our Native Nations to get culturally appropriate foods and services to them.

We are focused not only on ending hunger today, but **ENDING HUNGER TOMORROW** by addressing root causes of hunger and **ENDING HUNGER FOR GOOD** by building a future where hunger doesn't exist.

But we can't do this work alone, it takes government, public and private entities standing beside each other and working **TOGETHER** to end hunger.

Thank you.