



U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations

“Review of USDA Nutrition Distribution Programs”
December 8, 2021

Testimony of Dave Donaldson
Co-Founder and Chairman

Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and members of the Subcommittee, CityServe International (CityServe) offers the following comments on USDA’s Nutrition Distribution Programs and the role that faith-based organizations can provide in the execution of these programs.

My name is Dave Donaldson. I am the co-founder and Chairman of CityServe International. I am grateful to each of you for your service on the Agriculture Committee for a couple reasons: First, I married a farmer’s daughter from North Dakota and helped to manage our ranch in North Dakota for several years, so I know the value family farms bring to our nation. Also, I know what it is like to go to bed hungry. In 1969 my parents were hit head-on by a drunk driver killing my dad and debilitating my mother for many years. A village comprised of government, food banks and churches provided food and clothing with the hope that we could make it through the crisis. Subsequently, my mother got on her feet and became a lead buyer for Dow Chemical.

Background

CityServe International is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt faith-based organization that provides logistical and structural guidance to churches that feel ill equipped to fully reach and meet the needs of their local communities. Local needs and community initiatives include addressing hunger as well as meeting the needs of the poor and disaffected, the addicted, and the exploited. Through capacity and partnership building, CityServe assists in empowering churches to make greater community engagement and impacts across the world. CityServe’s collaborative network includes faith-based non-profits, corporations, retail stores, farmers, and ranchers among other food supply partnerships.

Since 2016 the CityServe supply chain comprised of warehouse “HUB’s” channeled millions worth of household goods, furniture, school supplies, toys, and food to local churches serving their communities. Local churches are the primary Point of Distribution (POD). Each POD has committed to be actively involved with their neighborhoods and community through compassion initiatives. In 2020, CityServe and its Regional Affiliates distributed over \$500 million of in-kind gifts through PODs to needy families across America. At the urging of my wife who taught

school for 13 years we are even developing Teacher Resource Centers to furnish teachers with school supplies. It should be noted that instead of this product ending up in landfills it is meeting tangible needs.

Current USDA Nutrition Distribution Programs

Specific to USDA's currently operated nutrition distribution programs, CityServe is aware of The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). CityServe acknowledges the goals of these programs to meet the nutritional needs of vulnerable American citizens. We also recognize, however, that gaps exist within and among these programs in both rural and urban communities.

It is well known that over 40 million Americans face hunger every day and that food insecurity affects all genders, ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds. Through-out the CityServe network we have established over 2,000 distribution sites that have been trained in proper food management and distribution. Despite working with varying ethnic groups, seniors, and children, CityServe and its affiliate members have not participated in TEFAP, CSFP, or FDPIR. While we acknowledge the work of these programs, access to them to further drive down community and regional hunger has not been available to our organization.

Pandemic Response – Farmers to Families Food Box Program

In May 2020, USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service developed and executed the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. By all acknowledgement, this new and innovative program was geared to respond to anyone in the U.S. facing food insecurity due to Sars-CoV-2, also known as the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The food box program, however, has been catalytic in discovering other needs of families that CityServe has been able to tangibly meet by providing beds, diapers, school supplies, and home furnishings, among other needs. During each distribution, which represented 17 million boxes from June 2020 through May 2021, CityServe cultivated the trust of under-resourced families and successfully linked them to both public and private programs geared towards helping them move from dependency to stability.

During the operation of the box program, CityServe and its 2,000 plus affiliated organizations which included hundreds of African American led churches within the National Baptist Convention, Hispanic churches, and great organizations like World Vision, we worked to ensure the neediest among us had the opportunity to receive food who would otherwise go without sustenance due to no fault of their own. The program effectively responded to the significant and persistent economic disruptive effects on urban and rural communities across America. In addition, it would become transformative in not just reaching those acutely affected by recent joblessness, but also the long-term unemployed who had given up on both employment opportunities and traditional government social support systems.

On a personal note, I participated in many of the distributions and as part of the "Means Testing" and spoke with people about their need for the food boxes. Nearly every person I spoke to said that they were running out of food and felt alone in their struggle. I cannot adequately convey the

importance of the food but also the social interaction with people closed off from their support system of friends. This degree of interaction is typically not available at traditional USDA food distribution outlets.

As the pandemic persisted in 2020, CityServe shifted its focus towards incremental improvements to USDA's food box program and even coined the term "Last Mile" to describe its mission to assist the hardest to reach regions in the nation. USDA subsequently incorporated last mile organizations in the program which enabled CityServe, among many other non-profit and faith-based organizations, to efficiently maximize the reach of the box program. By the end of the program, CityServe and its affiliates assisted in the delivery of 17 million food boxes to urban, rural, Tribal Nations and to those in the Rio Grande Valley. In addition, CityServe has formed enduring relationships with over 30,000 families and individuals who were given a food box but now have also found new purpose and commitments within their communities.

It should be noted that the majority of last mile food box distribution work was funded through direct donations and targeted fundraising. In addition, some USDA contractors voluntarily contributed to CityServe in the early rounds of the food box program. These monies offset the costs of the last mile deliveries for expenses such as personal protective equipment, refrigeration, storage, and transportation costs. When last mile was merged into USDA's solicitation process, awarded contractors in most cases committed resources to faith- and community-based organizations in advance of distributions. This action provided for reaching even farther into America's food insecure populations.

The food box program was the first time CityServe was significantly incorporated in a USDA food distribution program. In addition, the program's structure provided for higher levels of nutrition with its inclusion of fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, and dairy products. While the program was discontinued on May 29, 2021, in an assessment of USDA's traditional programs in light of the food box program, CityServe projects that if an aggressive effort of faith- and community-based non-profit organizations was incorporated within the current body of food assistance programs an additional 20 million people annually would be reached. This reach would translate in helping pull Americans out of poverty and deal with the conditions that contribute to food insecurity.

Post-Pandemic

Many valuable lessons were learned from the food box program. The most significant among them is that the distribution of highly perishable food and nutrition assistance generally can be performed in ways that were not previously contemplated and tested. Secondly, the food box has proven that the federal government can utilize the efficiencies and seasonality of food in the free market to purchase and deliver high quality, fresh and highly nutritious food at reasonable prices and place that food directly in the hands of the food insecure population. Such a program, began and could continue to cure food deserts, assist in curbing health issues that are prevalent among low income and food insecure populations, and further the goal of ending hunger in America.

Because of these lessons, CityServe, food pantries, and food producers and distributors across the country are all attempting to replicate the program with private funding. CityServe is

currently conducting food box program distributions in several states. That said, the resources of the federal government in redeploying the food box program and its inclusion of the faith- and community-based organization could significantly bridge gaps in current USDA programs and curb food insecurity among all genders, ages, and ethnicities in both rural and urban communities. CityServe highly encourages Congress restore the food box program as a tool within USDA's nutrition distribution programs. We also encourage the inclusion of faith- and community-based organizations in existing USDA distribution programs.

Conclusion

CityServe has assisted in the delivery of 17 million USDA food boxes to the "hardest-to-reach" communities. Generally, CityServe's work represents a community of churches and non-profit organizations that have proven that their assistance is needed and that we will continue to be a critical member of the nutrition assistance community to respond to that need. The reach of our organization has found food insecure populations in both urban and rural areas and among some in Tribal Nations. CityServe takes seriously the work of feeding the needy, but in addition it also works to investigate and solve the underlining conditions associated with Americans who are food insecure. For this reason, we have developed a network and skill set to reach and maintain the connection with families and individuals who are often lost within federal and state social programs. We will continue to perform this mission and request that the recommendations above be considered and incorporated in the Committee's ongoing work.

CityServe thanks the subcommittee for inviting us to provide testimony and is committed to the conversation and action towards improving the efficiency and value of federal nutrition assistance and distribution programs.