

United States House Committee on Rules

Subcommittee on Legislative and Budget Process

Using Budget Principles to Prepare for Future Pandemics and Other Disasters

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WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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Chairman Morelle, Ranking Member Cole and members of the Rules Committee: good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Julia Tedesco and I am the president & CEO of Foodlink, a nonprofit organization in Rochester, NY, that serves as the regional food bank for 10 counties.

Congressman Morelle likely recalls attending Foodlink's very first COVID emergency response food distribution on March 20, 2020, in his hometown of Irondequoit. There was a lot we didn't know about COVID then, but as an emergency response organization, we knew that families were already struggling to access food, as they do in the face of any crisis. That day, a collaboration between the nonprofit and government sector enabled us to safely get food to more than 300 households. In the two years since, we've organized more than 900 similar drive-thru emergency food distributions.

In the next few minutes, I'd like to accomplish two things.

- **First**, I'll share details about Foodlink's response during the pandemic – what we saw and experienced as one of many first responders called upon to meet the rising demand of hunger.
- **Second**, I'd like to talk about the critical role that nonprofits play and why deepening partnership and investment in this sector will help prepare us for any future emergency response. In doing so, I will do my best to represent the 200+ Feeding America food banks – Foodlink's sister organizations across the nation - that have responded to the COVID-19 crisis and countless other disasters.

Much attention has been given to the pandemic's devastating impact on the food security of millions of families. Long food lines started to form as the nation caught a glimpse – usually with drone footage thousands of feet above – of just how many Americans were one crisis away from not having enough food to eat.

We saw this firsthand in the City of Rochester, and in the suburban and rural communities throughout our service area. As many as 40% of the people seeking support from the emergency food system were doing so for the very first time. We heard their stories. Some were told to us through a hotline we set up early in the pandemic. Some via social media, from people who wanted to know where and when we'd be distributing food. Some told us their stories while waiting in line, tears in their eyes as they thanked us for basic food items.

At the same time, schools closed indefinitely. The City of Rochester owns one of the highest child poverty rates in the nation. Every student in the district is categorically eligible for free school meals. With schools closed, parents were left wondering how to account for two extra meals, per child, per day—a looming financial and health crisis of its own.

Foodlink sprang into action on both fronts.

In response to the need, we—within a matter of weeks -- established temporary alternate warehousing facilities to safely store and pack emergency provisions. When a majority of our direct service partners – think of food pantries in community centers and church basements--were forced to shut down, we designed and coordinated no-touch, drive through distributions in centralized locations across a 7,000-square-mile region.

When government and community partners had critical information or supplies they needed to get to the public, we utilized these distributions to disseminate them. We became a central hub for everything from suicide prevention and mental health resources, to U.S. Census data collection.

When a nurse from our regional health care system called us frantically to figure out how to get food to an elderly, quarantined, immuno-compromised patient, we – for the first time in our 40+ year history – made a home delivery, triggering a partnership with a local nonprofit partner to continue home deliveries to our elderly population.

We sat with leaders from our local City school district to brainstorm and coordinate the logistics of 17 grab-and-go meal sites for kids and their families. Understanding that barriers still existed for food access, we repurposed some of our smaller trucks and – due to waivers issued by the USDA - implemented ice cream truck-style neighborhood meal distributions to complement our Summer Meals program.

Foodlink distributed more than 50 million pounds of food in the last 22 months, and our kitchen produced more than 1.5 million healthy meals and snacks. Our fellow food banks in New York State and around the nation all did similar work. We distributed unprecedented amounts of nutritious food, leveraging our relationships in the communities we serve, expertise in logistics and food distribution, and our infrastructure which includes billions of dollars of food-related assets – including distribution centers, industrial freezers and coolers, commercial kitchens and fleets of trucks.

Significant government interventions, such as child tax credits, boosts in SNAP benefits or “P-EBT” and more, helped quell what surely would have been devastating poverty levels. Still, food insecurity remains approximately 10% higher than the levels recorded in 2019. In our region, that equates to about 150,000 people who have limited access to food. 150,000 people who, on any given day, might not know when or from where their next meal will come.

By now you should know this stat all too well – but it is important to emphasize that for every one meal that a Feeding America food bank provides, SNAP provides *nine* meals. If we are to make a meaningful reduction to hunger in America and address a compounding factor in any crisis, the federal government must continue to increase investments in the best anti-poverty program we know of –SNAP -- as well as WIC and child tax credits. We also encourage the federal government to continue to improve flexibility when administering meal programs by making many of the USDA waivers permanent.

But in addition to investing in the social safety net, I am strongly advocating for the federal government to more significantly invest in the non-profit sector’s ability to respond to crises.

Nonprofits are not merely a group of small charities trying to do good. We are oftentimes the engine that generates innovative solutions to complex problems in our society. When the government needed to find ways to distribute food, PPE, vaccines and information into underserved communities, it relied on the infrastructure, expertise and flexibility of nonprofit organizations.

Far too often, though, nonprofits like Foodlink are asked to execute on programs that we did not have an opportunity to develop or weigh in on. Issues with the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program have already been well-documented, and I won’t go into all of them here for the interest of time. But I hope a major lesson from CFAP is that when the federal government needs to find ways to help feed people, it should include the expertise of the Feeding America network, rather than recreate the wheel. This nation already has a centralized hub for emergency food assistance – with spokes across every state, county and local community in America, that could have helped to ensure smoother logistics and equitable access to these food boxes. If food banks were included from the start – and leveraged for their expertise in this area, we could have significantly reduced staff time spent on coordination, saved dollars, and fed more Americans.

Moreover, I also hope that a critical lesson to come out of the pandemic is the importance of investing in nonprofit infrastructure. There were times in the last few years where we had adequate food, but

insufficient cold storage and refrigerated vehicles. Foodlink has stationed rented tractor trailers in our parking lot running 24/7 for 2 years, providing additional cold storage. We are still seeking the right technological solutions to help us improve our inventory management and delivery processes.

Nonprofits don't have the resources to do R&D and invest in innovation the way that the private sector does, and when we do it rarely, if ever, is funded by the federal government. We are encouraged by the USDA's promised investments in strengthening our food system, and hope that those investments extend beyond farmers, producers and for-profit distributors to include the non-profit sector.

To summarize: the pandemic has shown us that the federal government has a real stake in the operational efficiency, infrastructure and capacity, and innovation of the nonprofit sector, especially when responding to disasters. To be better prepared for the next crisis, we at Foodlink believe that the social safety net – and SNAP in particular, should be strengthened. We also believe that a partnership between the federal government and nonprofit sector should be strengthened in two ways: first, through investments in nonprofit sector infrastructure needs including technology, facilities, transportation and people. And second, by inviting nonprofits to not only receive support and deliver services decided on by government, but to take part in the very design of those services – even, and *especially*, during public health crises or other disasters.

Thank you for your time today, and I'm happy to answer questions.