

From: Brent Ducharme  
To: Gene Nichol  
Re: Interviews on food insecurity in North Carolina today  
Date: May 1, 2015

### I. Introduction: The Current State of Hunger in North Carolina

With Feeding America's recent release of their Map the Meal Gap 2015 report,<sup>1</sup> it is clear that food insecurity continues to plague North Carolinians across our state. The state's food insecure population now tops 1.8 million, accounting for 18.3% of the state population.<sup>2</sup> That overall food insecurity rate is 2.5% higher than the national average.<sup>3</sup> Hunger is an even more pronounced issue among North Carolina's children. Childhood food insecurity is estimated at 26.1% in our state.<sup>4</sup> Food insecurity rates are above 15% in all but nine of North Carolina's one hundred counties.<sup>5</sup> In 2012, two of North Carolina's metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs)—Greensboro-High Point and Asheville—were among the ten MSAs with the highest food insecurity rates in the country.<sup>6</sup>

While the lack of access to food squarely affects North Carolinians based on their financial means, the inequity is deeply tied to racial lines as well, as food insecurity is especially pervasive in the state's African-American communities. In the Albemarle region, the northeastern quarter of North Carolina that is home to many of our state's African-American communities, the vast majority of counties have food insecurity rates

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<sup>1</sup> Map the Meal Gap 2015, which uses data from 2013, is accompanied by an interactive map, available at <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* These counties are Camden, Chatham, Currituck, Davie, Henderson, Polk, Union, Wake, and Yadkin.

<sup>6</sup> Food Research and Action Center, "Food Hardship in America 2012," available at [http://frac.org/pdf/food\\_hardship\\_2012.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/food_hardship_2012.pdf).

of 20% or more.<sup>7</sup> In neighboring Halifax and Edgecombe Counties, more than 25% of residents are food insecure.<sup>8</sup> The racially disparate impact of hunger in North Carolina becomes even more palpable when tracked by Congressional district. The First Congressional District, spanning much of the Albemarle region, has a 54.4% African-American population.<sup>9</sup> The Twelfth Congressional District, which roughly follows the Interstate 85 corridor from Greensboro to Charlotte, has an African-American population of 51.6%.<sup>10</sup> In both congressional districts, more than 26% of the population is food insecure.<sup>11</sup> None of North Carolina’s other congressional districts—all with majority white populations—have a food insecurity rate that reaches 20%.<sup>12</sup>

To learn more about the current state of food insecurity in North Carolina, and what is being done to address it, I interviewed officials from three food banks across the state, as well as a number of food pantries that operate alongside them.

## II. Filling the Bowls of the Albemarle Region

Based in Elizabeth City, the Food Bank of the Albemarle (“Albemarle”) serves a 15-county area spanning some 6,000 square miles. The Albemarle food bank covers its service area with the help of between 130 and 140 partner agencies. Annya Soucy, the Director of Communications and Special Events at the Albermarle, discussed the food bank’s programs and the challenges they face while serving the predominantly rural northeastern portion of the state.

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<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* Halifax County has a food insecurity rate of 25.1%, while Edgecombe County sits at 25.7%.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2013 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Feeding America, “Map the Meal Gap 2015” Interactive Map, *available at* <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

While much of the Albemarle's food stock is received through Feeding America and its national partners, Ms. Soucy emphasized the food bank's efforts to engage with local sources of food directly. The Albemarle's Food Resource Coordinator has focused on building partnerships with grocery stores in the area. For example, "Roses, the local discount store, sends us a lot of food. We reached out to Roses directly and told them if any food is denied when the store receives it, they can just bring it to us." Given the shared goal of all North Carolina's food banks to provide fresh produce, the Albemarle's Food Resource Coordinator also reaches out to local farmers for potatoes, cabbage, and other items. These outreach efforts have been pivotal to rescuing surplus food that local farmers might otherwise let go to waste. Ms. Soucy highlighted the Albemarle's partnership with Pamlico Shores Produce, a local potato grower based in Hyde County. Before the Albemarle reached out to Pamlico Shores, many of the grower's potatoes that were rejected by grocery stores were simply left to waste. With this produce now headed to the Albemarle, the food bank has a surplus of potatoes that it can provide to sister food banks. In fact, Ms. Soucy stated that the North Carolina Association of Feeding America Food Banks recently purchased a produce bagger to help the Albemarle send its surplus potatoes around the state.

Whether the food is coming from Feeding America or the Albemarle's own partnerships, the food bank has found a range of initiatives to ensure the food arrives to the food insecure people of the region. To provide for the coastal region's food insecure children, the Albemarle has championed a range of afterschool meals programs and weekend food backpack programs. The Albemarle administers an afterschool meal program as part of the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program ("CACFP") in the

Elizabeth City-Pasquotank County school system. In Bertie County, one of the Albemarle's partner agencies runs another successful afterschool meal program. Meanwhile, Beaufort County schoolchildren have benefitted from a backpack program conducted in county's largest town, Washington. Despite these successful programs, funding constraints have limited the ability of the Albemarle and its partner agencies to address child hunger in their service area. In Dare County, the Albemarle once partnered with a local non-profit to provide the largest weekend food backpack program in their service area. That program has now been cut. Similarly, a backpack program in Northampton County was cut because it of insufficient funding.

The Albemarle is confronted with the challenge of serving a population that, in addition to having high food insecurity rates, is spread throughout a wide swath of North Carolina's rural northeast. Over its thirty-year history, the Albemarle food bank has found a number of ways to address the difficulty of serving these rural areas. The food bank runs a rural delivery program, designed to ease the burden on many of the partner agencies that are not located near the food bank's central location in Elizabeth City. Through this program, the Albemarle uses its own tractor-trailers to make direct deliveries to some partner agencies and find centralized drop-off points to serve others. A recent grant from Walmart has helped the Albemarle purchase a refrigerated trailer, greatly enhancing their ability to provide rural partner agencies with fresh produce. "The refrigerated trailer helps because agencies do not always have enough refrigeration on-site," Ms. Soucy stated. "We can park the trailer in a rural area and tell our nearby partners to come get their produce over the course of a few hours or days."

While the rural delivery program helps the Albemarle better connect with its partner agencies, the food bank has also established a mobile food pantry system to provide direct support for underserved communities within its service area. The Albemarle's partner agencies help identify communities that appear to be underserved by tracking the zip code of everyone who comes to them for service. Ms. Soucy explained, "if we see that people from a particular zip code are underserved, our long term goal is establish a permanent partnership with a food pantry nearby. In the meantime, we will establish mobile food pantries to bring food to the community ourselves." Three mobile food pantries serve the coastal Hyde County. Ms. Soucy explained, "Hyde County is a food desert. It has no major grocery stores. And the food bank does not have any permanent partners in the county either." Neighboring Beaufort County has seen similar struggles. "Outside of the micropolitan area of Washington, there are few resources in Beaufort. Aurora [home to a pocket of Beaufort County's black population] recently had its only grocery store close." In Northampton County, the Albemarle is serving hungry community members through two mobile food pantries used to supplement the county's four partner agencies.

The Albemarle is also attempting to find funding for a mobile food pantry to serve Bertie County. Although Bertie County does not have the highest food insecurity rate in the Albemarle's service area, the county "has been a struggle for the food bank for all thirty years we have been open," according to Ms. Soucy. Bertie County's predominantly black population is plagued by multi-generational poverty that provides an additional challenge to the efforts of the food bank and its six partner agencies in the county. "This is different from when somebody needs food assistance for a period of

time because they lost their job,” Ms. Soucy explained. “Bertie is a place where poverty has persisted and little has changed in decades.”

The Albemarle clearly recognizes the scale of the task before it. While speaking of the high rates of food insecurity in the region, Ms. Soucy conceded, “our goal is to reach about half of the people in need in our service area.” The effort to set the bar higher is complicated by the broader financial struggles that plague the coastal states. “Our area struggles with economic development; many communities just do not have jobs that can pay a living wage.” While people might expect the area’s beaches to create plenty of wealth, “the people who live in these communities year around are mostly working in the service industry. As soon as tourism season is over, the food bank, the food pantries, we’re all busier.” What’s more, the region struggles with devastatingly high electricity bills that have caused many people who are already in financial straits to make near-impossible choices. Ms. Soucy explained, “as soon as it gets cold, the electricity bills go up. Then people come to us, needing assistance. They’re asking themselves ‘do I pay for electricity, or for food?’”

For all their effort to fight against hunger in North Carolina, Ms. Soucy acknowledged that the Albemarle, its sister food banks, and the smaller agencies they work alongside are “putting a band aid on a gaping wound. Food is essential, but food alone can’t solve the problem of poverty. As the largest non-profit in the Albemarle region, the food bank sees people from all walks of life coming in for all different reasons.” Ms. Soucy emphasized the importance of removing the assumptions about those who need food assistance. “It’s easy to generalize—some look and say, ‘these people chose to be poor’—but they need to recognize that is not true.” The varying faces

of poverty are something that Ms. Soucy and her colleagues at the Albemarle have come to know well. She recalled one local Coast Guard veteran whose family required food assistance after a series of events threw them into financial straits. “This veteran was unable to get benefits for a year or more because of a backlog at [the Department of Veterans Affairs].” After the veteran’s wife lost her job, they found themselves in line at one of the Albemarle’s partner agencies. Other faces of hunger, those of children, trouble Ms. Soucy all the more. “Kids are innocent; they are born into a situation out of their control.” For children, “food is the epicenter of so much. If a kid does not have enough food at home, we can’t really expect them to function at school.” For Ms. Soucy, the effort to help these children feels all the more important because she dealt with food insecurity in her own youth. “After my parents divorced, I remember a lady from a pantry leaving a Thanksgiving meal at our house. She left the meal for us, and then she was gone. I saw the selflessness of the people who do this work—they didn’t want recognition, they just wanted to help. That left a major impression on me. I was one of those kids.”

The Albemarle is joined in the fight against hunger by countless individuals such as Curt Kedley, a volunteer at the Good Shepherd Food Pantry (“Good Shepherd”) in Bertie County. Good Shepherd embodies the notion of food pantries as small organizations, committed to feeding as many people as possible in the face of minimal resources and an ever-growing need. Good Shepherd began as a mobile food pantry in 2007, and by May 2008 the Bertie County Commissioners provided the agency space in a vacant office building in the town of Windsor. With a staff of all volunteers drawing from a multiple denominational communities, Good Shepherd provides families with

meal packages on two Saturdays each month. The food packages consist of roughly three pounds of meat, three pounds of fruit, and eight pounds of canned goods and other assorted groceries. Most of this food is provided through the Albemarle food bank's partnership with Food Lion, with Good Shepherd's volunteers accepting direct delivery of the food and handling inspection on-site. Good Shepherd limits its distribution to one person per household and requires community members file an annual application, accompanied by a photo ID and utility bill. This system allows Good Shepherd to serve an average of 460 families across Bertie County each month—approximately 90% of them African-American. In 2014, that translated to 148,420 pounds of food distributed.

While Good Shepherd is making a significant impact in an impoverished county, Mr. Kedley acknowledged that the pantry is plagued by many of the same limitations that mark the food banking system. “We have limited financial resources. This is a real faith commitment—we rely on grants, but there is no guarantee the money will be there.” In addition to limited funding, Good Shepherd struggles with recruiting young volunteers. “Us volunteers, we're are an older group. We need the next generation to join in,” Mr. Kedley explained. He shared that the financial and staffing limitations came together in a powerful way when Good Shepherd recently lost one of its grants. “One of the organization that gave us grants switched to online applications. I'm older; I'm not too familiar with computers. I did something wrong on the application and we lost the grant.” In the face of these challenges, and in a county with much broader poverty concerns, Mr. Kedley emphasized, “we are just putting bread on the table, and that's it. The poverty that exists here, it's too much to address through just a food pantry. We are

a part of the network of services that help people in Bertie County, but we are all financially limited.”

Mr. Kedley echoed many of the statements from the Albemarle food bank when discussing the population that Good Shepherd serves. Many of the community members that come to the pantry are senior citizens, “former farm laborers with little in the way of Social Security.” Mr. Kedley continued, “you see all these old people in line at the pantry. They are waiting patiently, even the ones who can hardly walk. My heart goes out to them. It reminds me of photos of bread lines from years ago, but here it is today.” Last year, Mr. Kedley decided to visit the homes of some of those who Good Shepherd serves. Mr. Kedley’s first trip into the community brought him to the home of an elderly woman. When she did not answer the door, a neighbor advised Mr. Kedley that the woman was completely blind and homebound. “She wasn’t even able to make it to the food pantry, I realized we had volunteers bringing her food as she needed it.” Other visits revealed more stories: a group of pantry clients subleasing rooms in the bottom of a two-story house because the top floor was completely burnt out; a woman living in rural Bertie County and sharing her meal packages with neighbors too embarrassed to go to the food pantry. “It was a very humbling experience to see the faces of these people. We have to operate on faith—people are counting on us.”

### III. Burlington to Boone: Food Assistance in the Piedmont, the Triad, and the Mountains

The Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina (“Second Harvest”) is located in Winston-Salem and serves an 18-county area along with their 400 partner agencies. Last year, Second Harvest distributed roughly 25 million pounds of food in an area stretching from Alamance County in the east to Watauga County in the west. Some

17.1% of this area's total population, and 25.7% of its children, are food insecure.<sup>13</sup>

Caswell, Guilford, and Watauga County have the highest overall food insecurity rates in the service area, while more than 30% of children are food insecure in both Ashe and Wilkes County.<sup>14</sup> Tomi Melson, Second Harvest's Director of Development and Community Relations, described the effort that the food bank is making to serve this region.

Ms. Melson described the food banking system as "a three-legged stool: the food banks prepare and provide food, partner agencies distribute the food to local communities, and volunteers make the system run on both ends." This metaphor is all the more powerful in light of the fact that this "three-legged stool" has managed to not buckle under a massive amount of pressure in places like the Greensboro-High Point MSA and struggling rural counties nearby. Ms. Melson explained that the mass exodus of industries that once thrived in northwest North Carolina has caused much of the food insecurity in the region's rural counties. Textiles, furniture, and tobacco farming have all decreased in recent years. Although cities like Winston-Salem are establishing themselves as hubs for the medical industry, Ms. Melson noted that this does little for "an aging, specialized population who worked in manufacturing; people who are now in their 50's and 60's and cannot find work that fits their skills."

While other food bank officials discussed the various sources of food that they receive, Ms. Melson focused on the importance of a food bank having sufficient funds to make food purchases and the added control that monetary, rather than food, donations

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<sup>13</sup> Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest North Carolina, "Service Area Data from Map the Meal Gap 2015," *available at* <http://www.hungernwnc.org/about-hunger/CombinedMMG2015-Website.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

bring. Most immediately, purchasing food allows food banks to react to any shortages that they find in their own supplies. Purchasing a variety of food also allows food banks to acquire food necessary for the particular programs they are running. For example, Second Harvest focuses on purchasing food that is suitable for the backpack programs in its service area—this means buying food which young children can easily open and that requires no preparation. Similarly, the food bank is able to ensure they have a variety of food included in family meal packs, which are designed to sustain families through multiple meals by including many staple foods. Finally, Second Harvest uses food purchases to participate in “group buys” with the other North Carolina food banks, ensuring that produce from different parts of the state is spread around to food insecure people from the mountains to the coast.

Like all food banks, Second Harvest is confronted with the difficulty of working alongside partner agencies that are operating with limited resources. Second Harvest attempts to focus on “capacity building,” by providing partner agencies with both direct financial assistance and training for writing grants. Having partner agencies learn to write their own grants is important, Ms. Melson explained, because it “helps them get refrigerators, trailers, scales—all the items they need to operate, but that corporate and individual donors usually don’t even think to provide.” Second Harvest also maintains an agency relations team that attempts to ensure food pantries and other partners are bringing effective service to the community. While this team is often busy recruiting partner agencies in underserved areas, they also seek to streamline agencies’ operations where possible. Ms. Melson explained, “in some communities, there are a number of partner agencies already in place. When that is the case, we encourage them to

consolidate. Or we might look at an agency’s hours of operation and encourage them to open at different times or more days of the week, depending on what others are doing.”

Second Harvest also tries to increase efficiency by connecting some rural partner agencies directly with grocery stores and other local sources of food. “It makes no sense for us to take food deliveries from a store in a county, then send the food right back to a partner agency in that same county. As long as the partner agency can inspect the food on site, it is better to have the food delivered directly to the agencies.”

As with the other food banks in our state, Second Harvest and its partner agencies are adopting a range of initiatives to specifically address the issue of child hunger. Second Harvest administers on-site feeding programs through the state’s Summer Seamless Feeding Program (“SSFP”). The SSFP program provides additional meals during the summer to children in low-income areas, particularly where 50% of children qualify for free or reduced lunch. Second Harvest is currently operating roughly eighteen SSFP sites spread around Forsyth, Guilford, Stokes, and Alexander County. While these programs meet an important need and Second Harvest hopes to expand them throughout the service area, there are significant challenges that these programs present. Ms. Melson indicated that Second Harvest must first find a host site that is both accessible to children and has the space to accommodate the program. In many parts of Second Harvest’s service area, programs like these need to account for the fact that there is no public transportation. Ms. Melson maintained that these logistical challenges are not simply a burden to food banks—they are significantly undermining the scope of the programs. “A large percentage of children who qualify for SSFP programs in the communities where

we have them do not take advantage of the programs. The kids simply can't get to them.”

Second Harvest is also pushing to reduce childhood food insecurity through establishing school food pantries. The food bank is currently operating seven school food pantries in five counties, including one that recently opened in Burlington. School food pantries require a partnership between the food bank, a school, and a partner agency that can administer the program. Generally, Second Harvest establishes new school food pantries with the goal of providing funding for one year, allowing time for partner agencies to establish a steady source of funding before they eventually assume full control of the program. Sometimes, the community takes a more active role from the start. Ms. Melson highlighted a school food pantry that recently opened at Moore Magnet Elementary School in Winston-Salem. There, members of the local Temple Emanuel and Highland Presbyterian Church came together to provide funding and volunteers for the school food pantry—Second Harvest simply needed to facilitate. These school food pantries have a number of advantages in meeting the goal of feeding hungry children. While transportation concerns present a challenge to many programs, school food pantries are generally located in schools, the very places where a community is already sending its children each weekday. Even when school food pantries are located off-site because of resource limitations, the food is housed at a nearby food pantry or other partner agency. Additionally, Ms. Melson emphasized the importance of these programs in connecting parents with food assistance. “The best way to feed a child is to feed their family,” and school counselors reach out to parents to advertise the school food pantry as much as possible.

While Second Harvest and its partner agencies make a considerable effort to alleviate food insecurity in all the counties within their service area, Ms. Melson emphasized that much of the need still goes unmet. “There are food deserts in the cities, food deserts in the rural counties. A lot of the time, these areas result from a combination of poverty and segregation. [The problem of hunger] is so big that it will take more than food banks to address it. We need grassroots efforts and businesses to show a willingness to open in areas where others might not.” Ms. Melson continued by noting that officials at Food Lion, one of the franchises that have been an important partner for food banks across the state, have indicated they are interested in opening smaller operations in low-income communities. “That is the kind of action we need.”

Calling for an expansion of the effort to fight food insecurity, Ms. Melson emphasized that she is troubled by the poverty and hunger that she has seen in the communities Second Harvest serves. “This is a despicable situation in such a wealthy country—especially when you think about children. No child should be hungry. They can’t control their situation. Child hunger has a great impact on the ability to learn, on a child’s emotional well being. This issue is not just a problem of today. Children going hungry will impact the future of our nation. It is so shortsighted to not see the danger of raising our children without providing them enough food to eat.”

Open Door Ministries is one of Second Harvest’s partner agencies located in High Point. In addition to its food programs, the agency operates a homeless shelter, adult educational programs, and provides emergency financial assistance to community members. Ms. Leslie Graham, Director of Donor Services, spoke to me about the effort that Open Door Ministries is making to address hunger in one of the most food insecure

MSAs in the country. The agency serves roughly 250 families through its food pantry every month. Although clients can return to the food pantry every thirty days, the need in High Point is so great that the agency encourages them to wait 60 days between visits, to allow food to be spread more through the community. Open Door Ministries requires an application and photo ID before serving individuals through their food pantry. Through their partnership with Second Harvest and other organizations, the food pantry is able to make food available to people from Guilford, Randolph, and Davidson Counties.

However, for High Point residents specifically, Open Door Ministries offers additional food that it has collected itself through food drives. Ms. Graham claimed that this “full package” (a combination of food from Second Harvest and Open Door Ministries’ open food drives) that High Point residents receive provides roughly ten days worth of food for one person. While Open Door Ministries places some limitations on service through its food pantry, the agency’s soup kitchen adopts an open door policy, serving two or three meals every day of the week to any community members who come in.

Even though Open Door Ministries is large enough to maintain thirty full- and part-time employees, the agency still faces significant resource challenges. “Our food shelves are not full. Second Harvest provides us with a great amount of food, but we rely heavily on our own food drives to keep the shelves stocked,” Ms. Graham explained. Given the scope of Open Door Ministries’ operations, finances are also a concern. “We are not bringing money in, but we need money to operate. We have to pay staff, pay for our office equipment, everything. So we rely heavily on donations and grants. But the trouble with grants is once those programs are exhausted, the well is dry.” Fortunately,

the agency is able to maintain the ambitious scope of its operations with the assistance of many volunteers from the community who take part in the food pantry and soup kitchen.

When discussing the experience working at a non-profit like Open Door Ministries, Ms. Graham emphasized the rewarding nature of the work. “Getting to know people in the community on a first name basis, becoming like a family—that is the most rewarding part.” That family represents a wide range of people in the community. “We serve everybody. It’s hard to identify any particular group. We see some multigenerational poverty; other people just fell on hard times. We see senior citizens, young families, veterans, and people with disabilities. It’s all across the board.”

#### IV. Hunger from the Triangle to the Coast: North Carolina’s Largest Food Bank Region

The Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina (“FBCENC”) is the largest food bank in the state. The FBCENC shares a thirty-four county area with over 800 partner agencies, serving more than 500,000 people in an area that is home to roughly 646,700 food insecure people.<sup>15</sup> In addition to its main branch in Raleigh, the FBCENC has satellite food banks that operate in Durham, Greenville, New Bern, Sandhills, and Wilmington. Ms. Earline Middleton, Vice President of Agency Services and Programs at the FBCENC, spoke to me about tension between the food bank’s massive scope of operations—FBCENC distributed some 53.6 million pounds of food during the last fiscal year last year—and the ever-growing need in the communities they serve.

In an effort to decrease child hunger, the FBCENC has implemented a number of programs to get food to children throughout the school year and during summer vacation. During the school year, much of this effort focuses on weekend backpack programs that

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<sup>15</sup> Feeding America, “Map the Meal Gap 2015” Interactive Map, *available at* <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>.

provide food to young children and establishing school food pantries in public schools. While the FBCENC's school pantries have been successful, the fact that school pantries are only operating in Durham and Wake County speaks to the uphill battle that FBCENC is fighting. "Given the rates of child hunger here, we are simply trying to get these school pantries in place where we can. We hope to have them in all school systems one day." The school food pantries have proven particularly successful in elementary schools, where children may be less aware of the stigma associated with requiring food assistance. Ms. Middleton said that, with older children, "nobody wants to be the person who doesn't have food." To combat this stigma, the school food pantries strive to provide a "safe and confidential place" and to connect with parents where possible, to ensure that as many children are being fed as possible.

While feeding children during the school year is important, Ms. Middleton emphasized that child hunger is an even larger problem in the summer, when students are not guaranteed the meals they would typically receive during the school year. Given this additional need, the FBCENC partners with community-based organizations to administer the USDA's Kids Summer Meals program, which provides free breakfast and lunch to children in low-income areas during the months when they are not in school. In 2014, the FBCENC's sponsored summer programs provided over 176,000 meals to 5,000 children at 105 different locations.

While the partnership between the food bank and local community organizations that administer the Kids Summer Meals program is clearly making an impact on child hunger in the region, Ms. Middleton indicated there are significant hurdles that need to be overcome for children to be efficiently served each summer. Mirroring a general

recommendation from Feeding America that the program be streamlined, the FBCENC is advocating for an application process that will be less burdensome to the parents of children in need. “We are feeding a lot of the same children over and over,” said Ms. Middleton, noting these children tend to receive free and reduced lunch throughout the school year.

Unfortunately, the challenges involved in running a Kids Summer Meals program do not end once the children arrive on-site. Food banks must also monitor what is happening with the food once it is served, because the USDA only reimburses food banks for meals that children eat on-site. This presents some logistical problems for a Summer Meals program as large as the one led by the FBCENC. Given the large number of children served, the programs are administered outdoors. Therefore, the USDA’s reimbursement conditions present a problem whenever inclement weather hits. If bad weather forces the children at a Kids Summer Meals program indoors, the churches and local community centers that host the program may often not be able to accommodate the large number of children waiting to be fed. In the past, the USDA has granted the FBCENC an exemption from the requirement that children eat their meals on-site when temperatures made it unsafe to be outdoors—the children were still able to get their food, even if they had to eat it elsewhere, and the food bank was still reimbursed for the meals. Ms. Middleton said the FBCENC would like these waivers to be more widely available, although she made clear that “ninety percent of the time, even if [the food bank] can’t be reimbursed, we will make sure those children are fed.”

In addition to its efforts to feed the region’s children, the FBCENC is currently implementing another program that will address food insecurity among a segment of the

population many others are not even considering: men and women recently released from prison. Although Ms. Middleton indicated the food bank is not yet releasing information about the program publicly, she was willing to share the basic details of their new effort to help formerly incarcerated people reintegrate into society. The FBCENC has received approval from the North Carolina Department of Corrections to provide prisoners with an application for Food and Nutrition Services (“FNS”) federal benefits upon their release. Ms. Middleton was very hopeful for this new initiative, as she believes it can “help prevent people from getting out of prison, giving in to the fact they don’t have basic necessities like food, and doing something that puts them right back in prison.” Ms. Middleton acknowledged the food bank is unsure how many members of the public will react to the initiative, but highlighted its efficiency in asking, “why wait for a man or woman to be at the food pantry to provide them with service, when we can offer help before that and cut the problem off when they are reintegrating into society?” Ms. Middleton stated that this new initiative may be in place by the end of the summer and that, while she is hopeful other food banks will follow suit, this is an effort that the FBCENC is making independent of the state association of food banks.

While finding new ways to combat food insecurity, the FBCENC remains limited by many of the challenges that food banks elsewhere experience. Chief among these is the reliance on partner agencies whose valiant effort is in spite of, not because, their level of resources and expertise. Ms. Middleton stated the difficulties can be as basic as ensuring that partner agencies “have the capacity for fresh produce—the ability to refrigerate is not guaranteed with many partner agencies.” Accordingly, the FBCENC often allocates money to partner organizations for refrigerators and other equipment. In

addition to direct financial support, the FBCENC attempts to help partner agencies develop their own expertise in running a non-profit organization. Mr. Middleton highlighted the FBCENC's effort to host grant-writing programs, necessary because many partner agencies are unfamiliar with many opportunities to obtain funding.

Funding problems exist for the FBCENC itself as well. While officials at other food banks were hesitant to speak about recent changes in the way they are receiving funding from the state government, Ms. Middleton provided some sense of displeasure North Carolina's food banks feel after recently being removed from the annual state budget. As part of the state government's base budget, the state food bank association would receive funds that were then split equitably among the food banks. Now, the food banks are left to compete for grants from DHHS. Although this new grant process has not yet resulted in a decrease of state government funding yet, according to Ms. Middleton, it naturally brings a sense of uncertainty to the funding process. The state association of food banks is still taking the lead on acquiring DHHS grants, but some food banks are applying individually and it is unclear whether funds the association receives from DHHS will be split equitably or according to each food bank's scale of operations. Regarding the tension in how DHHS funds might be split by the food banks, Ms. Middleton laughed and said only, "that is the ongoing concern; the big issue that the state association is continuing to discuss."

Whatever funding concerns exist for the FBCENC and its partner agencies, these organizations continue to provide relief to many of the region's food insecure. In the rural parts of Orange County, much of this relief comes from the Hillsborough-based Orange Congregations in Mission ("OCIM"). Ms. Kay Stagner, manager of OCIM's

client services, discussed the agency's efforts to feed the hungry in the face of rural poverty. OCIM runs a referral-based food pantry that serves the entire Orange County school district, and assists community members who are referred from Orange County DSS, the county school system, mental health programs, and pastors from various churches in northern Orange County. The pantry can provide a referred individual with a week's worth of groceries, up to six times a year. In 2014, OCIM's food pantry served 8,946 people, averaging 746 people each month. In addition to its food pantry, OCIM serves homebound community members through a Meals on Wheels program and aims to address broader poverty concerns by providing emergency financial assistance to those struggling to pay their bills.

Rather than focus on any organizational challenges that OCIM faces, Ms. Stagner emphasized the broader challenges that exist in northern Orange County and make programs like OCIM's food pantry all the more necessary. "Transportation is a huge issues for people in northern Orange County. Very few of the bus lines that exist in Chapel Hill come up [to Hillsborough]. We have three grocery stores all in close proximity to one another and many people cannot walk to them if they wanted to." Underemployment is also a significant challenge for many of OCIM's clients, as they struggle to find suitable employment in the absence of the manufacturing industry that once provided jobs for Orange County's working class.

When discussing the people who OCIM serve, Ms. Stagner emphasized, "there is an overarching sense of depression and anxiety in people. There is real desperation when they know their utilities will be cut off if they don't pay their bill by the evening, and here they are needing food." Recognizing that food assistance accounts for a small piece

of the financial challenges that confront many of the people OCIM serves, Ms. Stagner reasoned, “providing food gives these people one less thing to worry about.” This effort in easing the minds, and filling the plates, of Orange County’s poor is something that Ms. Stagner maintains should resonate with us all. “Most of us are one event away from having nothing.” That “one event” is something that Ms. Stagner has seen time and time again in her eighteen years at OCIM. “The last seven or eight years, we are helping more people who are better educated; folks who are new to needing help since the economic went downhill.” In fact, OCIM has served many people that once donated to some of the larger organizations that it is affiliated with. “These people used to give, and now they are here saying, ‘I never thought I’d need the help myself.’” Individuals such as a microbiologist who was laid off from her job, was overqualified for the positions she applied to, and decimated her savings simply trying to live. On the other hand, Ms. Stagner acknowledged that she sees significant amounts of multigenerational poverty in northern Orange County. She explained, “I’ve been doing this job for eighteen years. I’m serving the children of many people who were clients when I first started.”