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The Promise of the Texas Hunger Initiative

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The persistence of childhood hunger in America is a tragedy born out of a lack of public and political will. In my three decades fighting hunger both in America and around the world, it has always been clear to me that food insecurity is a problem that can be solved if we all work together. In their excellent article “Advancing Childhood Food Security Through Organizing Strategies,” Jeremy Everett, Jon Singletary, and Erin Nolen discuss how the Texas Hunger Initiative is working to end childhood food insecurity in Texas by focusing on a unique combination of collaboration and infrastructure.

The Texas Hunger Initiative derives much of its considerable early success from its commitment to bringing stakeholders at every level to the table. The Texas Hunger Initiative has been intentional about reaching across political, religious, and institutional lines, and in doing so has managed to create a remarkably open and collaborative environment. By acknowledging that each of the stakeholders is a part of the solution to hunger in Texas, and creating a space where all of the entities can sit down together to discuss their respective strengths and contributions, the Texas Hunger Initiative has made great strides in building trust between a wide variety of organizations and institutions. This sense of trust among stakeholders who may have been at odds in the past is providing the foundation for unprecedented levels of coordination and cooperation around this issue. The dramatic increase in statewide participation in both the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are testaments to the success of this collaboration.

As Jeremy Everett has frequently pointed out to me, one of the most significant barriers to ensuring food security for all children in the United States is a lack of accountability. There are countless organizations devoted to feeding hungry people in America, including religious and secular non-profits, the private sector, and state and federal agencies, to name a few. The problem is that no one agency or organization is fundamentally responsible for ending hunger. To counteract this problem, the Texas Hunger Initiative has done a commendable job of designing and implementing a multi-tiered infrastructure that neatly breaks down the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in ending childhood hunger in Texas, from federal agencies all the way down to local community experts. The interplay between the statewide Texas Hunger State Operations Team and the locally-based Food Planning Associations creates an integrated framework of mutual accountability that I believe is both intuitive to use and replicable in other states.

“Advancing Childhood Food Security Through Organizing Strategies” makes the point that the Texas Hunger Initiative is still a young effort that seeks to accomplish a great deal. While this is an important point, the accomplishments of the Texas Hunger Initiative to date should not be overlooked. To mention just one, the expansion of the Summer Food Service Program in San Angelo, Texas from 1,000 meals in 2009 to 25,000 meals in 2010 is truly remarkable, and really shows the promise of the Food Planning Association model. Beyond its existing accomplishments, I believe that the Texas Hunger Initiative’s vision is its greatest asset. In my experience, I have found time and again that the ability to articulate a vision that inspires hope for the future is critical to the success of any ambitious undertaking. By that measure, the Texas Hunger Initiative is currently positioned to have a major positive impact on the trajectory of childhood food security in the state of Texas. The Texas Hunger Initiative also serves as an inspiring example that can be emulated by emerging anti-hunger coalitions across the country.