

INNOVATIONS & COLLABORATIONS AGAINST HUNGER

BUILDING HUNGER NETWORKS - Matt Russell

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Stephen Lauer

Program Coordinator - World Food Prize Foundation

All right. Well, so we've talked about the state of hunger in Iowa – thanks again to our panel. Our next session is looking at innovations and collaborations to end hunger. And so we have four special addresses.

The first one will be given by Matt Russell. He's the Resilient Agriculture Coordinator at the Drake University Agricultural Law Center. He's also a farmer, and he's going to talk about "Building Hunger Networks." He's been very involved with local and regional food systems for at least a decade if not more. So, welcome, Matt.

BUILDING HUNGER NETWORKS

Matt Russell

Resilient Agriculture Coordinator, Drake University Agricultural Law Center

Thank you, Stephen, and thanks to the World Food Prize and the Iowa Hunger Summit for inviting me again. I'm going to talk not so much about how to build hunger networks but why hunger networks are so important. And I work at the Agricultural Law Center, and I've done a lot of work in food systems, a lot of work in sustainable agriculture since 1999. I moved back to Iowa, and really kind of justice around food systems has really motivated my work, and that's some of the things we do at the Center. We have a couple of websites, one for academic interests and for kind of general population and food and agricultural interests at DrakeAgLaw.org.

And these are my definitions, but before I jump into that, I want to just share a little biography, because my husband and I have a farm. I grew up in Western Iowa on a commodity farm. My brother and sister-in-law and my parents are still farming – corn, soybeans, cattle. And our farm southeast of Des Moines is non-commodity. It's retail agriculture, and my husband's full time on the farm, and I've been full time off the farm since 2005, and we do branded products – cattle, poultry, vegetables.

And we've had really the privilege for about the last eight years of working with teenagers. I think we're approaching about two dozen teenagers that have worked for us on the farm. And we always fed them, because we realized that when they show up to work on the farm for four hours and their breakfast was a Monster drink, we're not going to get a lot out of them. And we explained to them that that 50-cent peanut butter and jelly sandwich is paying us far more

dividends at \$10 an hour or \$40 for four hours than the 50 cents it costs us. So we've always fed them. But this summer we've had a different experience. We realized that some of the kids that were working for us were actually hungry. And I've worked in this field since '99. I understand. I've been educated. I can describe to you what's going on. But when you actually are sitting around the table, talking to someone who tells you that they really are hungry, that they have really gorged themselves at a meal because they don't know when they're going to eat again. I knew that. What I didn't know is that I knew people and cared about people who lived that and who explains that their mom is no longer maybe going to work at Casey's because the dollars that they're going to get paid offset the food stamps. I knew that. I just didn't know I knew people who lived that. And that's been a very profound experience.

We know what's going on around hunger, and we realize that we've got to fix it. So I've described hunger. It's not the problem – it's a symptom. It's a symptom of very complex, very interconnected problems in people's lives that need fixed. And the Policy Project did a really good job of explaining that. It's networks or systems of interconnected people. So a hunger network is that system of interconnected people that are working together to solve the complex problems – not just to feed people.

So I looked at four networks around the state, and the first one was Crawford County Hunger Fighters, and their website is there at the bottom, and we can probably get you access to those links to look more fully at it. But this was very new, a couple years old – it's organizations, businesses, individuals, volunteers, coming together. That network has created the ability for that network to grow. It has given some people something to hook onto. It identifies resources, it identifies needs, it recruits partners. It's a framework for the community, and it creates a structure to which community members can connect. So in a couple of years, they've gone from not existing to literally doing tens of thousands of pounds of food, hundreds of backpacks to the schools. That network has created a possibility for addressing not just putting food in front of people but addressing those community issues and leveraging outside community resources.

The Northeast Iowa Food Bank – another thing that they're doing that's really important is that they've institutionalized the relationships. We all know a case where somebody knows everybody, but if you're depending on that somebody, if that somebody goes away, then those relationships go away. Northeast Iowa Food Bank has been very intentional about connecting those relationships institutionally, so it becomes part of the organizational work. It starts with individuals, but then they tie it into the organizations. And as Barbara Prather says, it's not about the Food Bank being the king of the community – and later she said, it's leading with the person who needs the services and working with other organizations to make sure that all of the needs of that person are being met and not just getting food in front of them. It's part of staff development. The goal is the relationship. Obviously, it's personal, but it's embedding that through the organization and through the whole region, so it's not just this organization but the organizations working together. Things happen because of connections, and connections happen because of intentional networking.

The third place I looked at was down in Southeast Iowa, Des Moines County – how do you do this on a budget, like with no money? So they worked with the library. They meet monthly. They have a sign-in sheet, really low tech. They have a sign-in sheet, and somebody takes the responsibility of sending emails out to everybody. It's not always the same people who show

up, but they do it intentionally and regularly and it's very simple stuff. But it's about being staffed so people step in and do those things, and it's an excellent opportunity for new people in the community to connect with what's happening. Not high budget. The library posts it, public health records the folks, emails it out. But really significant things happen when you're intentional about this kind of networking.

And then the last thing I looked at was the Hunger Directory of the World Food Prize and the Iowa Hunger Summit. The thing about directories is that everybody likes to do them, but they're static unless you're doing something with them, unless they're staffed, unless there's an investment made. And that was something that was indicated by all the people I talked to, that the staffing is so important. They either said that directly, or they told me a story indicating how important the staffing is.

So hunger is never simply an isolated condition. It's connected. How do we connect it? If you look at the Hunger Directory, it's not just putting food in front of people. There's a lot of other organizations in there who are providing other services, so lots of networking.

And so the challenge is that - our organizations, even if we're not the one organizing, how do we take our organization and connect to the network? Right? Because that's how we're going to be very successful. And the point is that we have a big problem, and the wage gap and single families and medical crisis - there are just a plethora, dozens and dozens of situations that can put a family into hunger, into food insecurity.

How are we going to fix that? We live in a democracy. Government is not always the best tool, but for big problems, it's sometimes the very best tool. And in some ways we're backing away from that kind of investment. Certainly we need individual efforts, but if we have a system that doesn't recognize children who are in need and they can be invisible, that's a problem. If we have a system that incentivizes someone to not work - because to not work actually creates a greater food insecurity in the home - how are we going to fix this? It's possible, but we have to be intentional about it. We have to look for opportunities to make those investments, and the SNAP program is one of the most efficient programs in the country. A dollar into the program comes out multiplying at one of the highest levels of any government program. So, but we're pulling back from SNAP, right?

So the challenge is not just to get food in front of people. The challenge is to identify those situations that are creating the problem, and then how do we work together? And we're going to have lots of policy discussions, and that's part of our great democracy, is we get to sort that out and come up with really good solutions.

And I've got just time for one question if somebody has a question or a comment. This young man here.

Q How do we come up with the solutions?

A That's an excellent question, and I would encourage you to ask that question to everybody running for office and everyone in elected office. That is the challenge - right? How do we do this? How do we come up with the best ideas and the best solutions? Because this stuff is so interconnected, and if we just solve one problem in

that complicated life of a family, we're not going to get a very robust response; but if we can together identify several opportunities and collectively, efficiently solve those, then we end up solving even more problems than we're even focused on if we do it in an integrated, thoughtful, strategic, intentional way. Great question. Thank you very much.