

HUNGER AMONG THE ELDERLY POPULATION IN NEVADA

My name is Cherie Jamason, and for the past 20 years, I have been president and CEO of the Food Bank of Northern Nevada. For twenty-five years, the Food Bank has been a food support system for 110 partner agencies serving the needy, ill, elderly and children in the 13 northern counties of Nevada. Last year, we distributed about 4.4 million pounds of food, a third of which were perishables - which was provided to 58,340 clients through organizations and church pantries in most communities in Nevada from California to Utah and from Tonapah to the Idaho border. Almost three quarters of the people we serve are over age 65 or under age 18. The Community Hunger Report you have in your hands will detail many of the issues of which I will speak. Essentially, one in every 10 Nevadans will seek food assistance this year, and a significant proportion of them will be seniors.

In addition to food distribution through our partner agencies, we provide direct service programs which include monthly food boxes to low-income seniors the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (a USDA program), free summer and after-school meals for children in low-income neighborhoods, food stamp outreach, nutrition education for children and families, and a backpack program that provides take-home food for homeless children on Fridays, to help ensure that they have something to eat between school lunch on Friday to school breakfast on Monday.

Most of us realize that the senior population is growing in Nevada, not only as we all age, but with an influx of people moving from California and other states to take advantage of the amenities we have to offer. There has been a growth of 76% in the number of people age 65 and older in the past decade. For some people, however, the amenities don't look so great. At this time, there are about 31,000 people over age 65 living at or below the poverty line in Nevada, (under \$10,400 per year) and another 57,000 who live on between \$10,400 to \$20,800 a year - 100% and 200 % of poverty respectively. Even more shocking to all of us should be that that there are 17,583 people over age 55 in Nevada who live on less than \$5,200 per year – less than \$500 per month – or 50% of the poverty threshold.

What does that really mean?

One third of seniors must make hard choices – food, utilities, medical care, shelter. Most live on social security and rely on Medicare for health care – for many, there is no prescription coverage and it is not uncommon for medication to cost \$300-400 per month or more. Utilities, property tax increases, food and fuel costs can easily move the elderly beyond their ability to meet their basic needs. Food prices rose 5.1% in 2007, and staples such as milk, bread, cereal and eggs have risen even more sharply. In Austin, Nevada, a gallon of milk costs more than \$6 several months ago. My next door neighbors live on \$1200 in social security between them, and have been forced to take in two boarders to cover their bills. My husband recently took them to pick up two 35 pound boxes of food from our Commodity Supplemental Food Program, and it might as well have been gold.

While the Food Bank focus is more on emergency and chronic food assistance to help with food for seniors at home, I want to also provide you with some information secured from my

colleague, Brady Tarbutton, the Director of the Washoe County Senior Center. You will hear him testify about other issues today, and I am including his comments about seniors and hunger with my own.

There are three federal nutrition programs available for those over age 60. First is the Elderly Nutrition Program (which includes meals on wheels) – provided by senior centers in every community, for which one must be over age 60.

Mr. Tarbutton informed me yesterday that the number of meals provided by Washoe County Senior Center has remained at the same level for the past three years, due to cost. They cannot expand the program because of the increasing cost of food and transportation. They served 220,000 meals this past year - 98,000 at congregate meal sites and 122,000 through Meals on Wheels, which delivers hot meals, daily, to frail, homebound elderly. He felt they should be providing 50,000 more homebound meals, but does not have the financial resources to deliver the program. The risk of under-nutrition or even malnutrition among seniors is increasing, and with it the risk of deteriorating health, for the very reason thousands of seniors cannot provide their own meals – there is just not enough money to run the programs.

Congregate meal programs – lunch provided in cafeteria-like settings at senior centers, serve primarily poor elderly over age 60. The homebound meal program serves an even more critical health need – ensuring that those who have nobody at home to prepare meals or help them shop for food have at least one good nutritious meal every day. This is particularly important for elderly people going home from surgery or a hospitalization – without adequate nutrition it is difficult to heal properly. That one homebound meal provides about 750 calories, and those who are recovering their health should have two such meals to ensure adequate caloric intake.

In focus groups conducted by the Senior Center as part of their recent strategic planning effort, physicians stated that Washoe County does not have adequate nutrition services to help elderly people recover at home, which is the cheapest way to help people get back on their feet. One meal costs \$4 – two, obviously, cost \$8. The dilemma – two meals to those at higher risk, or one meal to help more people in general. Sort of like King Solomon dividing the baby, isn't it?

I asked Mr. Tarbutton what it would take to meet the standard of service he believes should be provided – his answer: \$250,000 more, this fiscal year. He needs more money.

In 1994, when the Food Bank first discovered the high percentage of seniors using our emergency food programs, we resolved to find a way to provide a consistent box of take home food for the elderly, particularly for those who, for reasons of transportation or lack of the suggested donation, do not take advantage of the meals served at senior centers throughout northern Nevada. We didn't have the kind of donated food that could make up one or two thousand boxes a month, and we did not, nor do we now, have the money to purchase all the food required for that kind of service.

[So, we launched an investigation and found the second federal nutrition program available for seniors - the Commodity Supplemental Food Program](#) – eligibility is 130% of poverty and 60 years of age.

In 1995, we therefore started lobbying Congress to secure the Commodity Supplemental Food Program for Nevada. CSFP, as it's called, was available in only a limited number of states at that time. It took going back, year after year, until Nevada was granted access to this valuable nutrition program in 2003. CSFP is provided in the north by the Food Bank of Northern Nevada, and in the south by Catholic Charities and a family resource center.

The state now has a food allocation for approximately 7000 clients, of which 2300 are in northern Nevada. *There is only one problem – while we have enough food for 7000 clients, between 30,000 and 32,000 people over 60 in Nevada are eligible for the program. The whole program needs more money, and a commitment by Congress to keep it in the Federal budget, so that eligible seniors in every state can receive monthly food boxes to maintain good health.*

[The Food Bank of Northern Nevada provided services to over 14,500 seniors last year in Northern Nevada and the Eastern Sierra. At least 2300 of those seniors were in receipt of the monthly commodity box through a direct service program offered by the Food Bank. More than 12,100 additional seniors were given bags of groceries at least monthly through emergency pantries and shelters.](#)

While there is a certain amount of distribution money available along with the food, the CSFP funding process was designed inside the beltway in Washington, DC. To administer CSFP in the geography of northern and rural Nevada, our Food Bank was required to generate an additional \$100,000 or so per year in private money to run the program properly. Fuel and staffing are two big expenses. We were extremely pleased this past session that the state agreed to provide some matching funds for CSFP, sort of a “fair share” investment in making it possible for eligible seniors throughout the state have equal access to this critical monthly box of nutritious food, which keeps hundreds of people from needing to seek emergency food assistance on a regular basis. Every month, they receive cereal, milk, canned fruits and vegetables, juices, protein, beans or peanut butter, rice or pasta and a brick of American cheese. We add fresh fruit, vegetables, bread and dairy products if at all possible. As one client says, regularly, “It helps keep the wolf from the door.”

Although the income threshold for CSFP is 130% of poverty, or \$1126 per month for a single person household, many of the people we serve live on between \$630 and \$800 per month. It doesn't buy much, believe me. One of our CSFP recipients is a Korean war vet, who lives on less than \$500 per month and would like to work, but is disabled. Another was a member of the OSS in World War II – his pension is \$680 per month, and he knows where every penny goes. These are proud people, and very grateful for everything they receive. We deliver CSFP to elderly people in 46 locations – at senior centers, churches and low income housing complexes for the elderly - about 28 locations in Washoe County and the remainder out as east as Elko, and as far south as Tonopah, with volunteers in every location to help carry these heavy boxes to cars and homes for people who are often quite frail. We need to

continue lobbying Congress to expand this program so that we can serve the 25,000 additional seniors who are eligible here in Nevada.

The third federal nutrition program available to seniors is the Food Stamp Program – eligibility is 130% of poverty with no age requirements, but assets are also evaluated, making many ineligible. This program is administered by state welfare, and our organization does regular outreach to help people, including seniors - with whom we will meet in their own homes - get connected to food stamp nutrition benefits. At this time, however, Nevada's participation rate is not excellent – fewer than 52% of eligible people participate and we are leaving more than \$150 million in pre-paid nutrition benefits on the table, which could be helping people buy the food they need at the grocery store.

The number of qualifying seniors approved for Food Stamps is fairly low, even though many would find it helpful. The application process is arduous. [The majority of seniors view the \\$10 minimum benefit for which they may be eligible as not worth the effort – and often think it should be reserved for “somebody worse off than they are.”](#) The Farm Bill being considered in Washington as we speak may raise that minimum benefit to \$25, which may help encourage more elderly people to enroll.

Many seniors we serve would be eligible for food stamps, except for a small amount of cash they have laid by to pay for their burials. Those meager assets keep them from receiving nutrition benefits at this time – as mentioned, we are anticipating that the new Farm Bill will change the asset limit, so that more seniors and families can receive supplemental nutrition benefits.

I'll wrap up with a few facts, released on March 5 from a study undertaken by the Meals on Wheels Association of America and the Center for Poverty Research at the University of Kentucky and funded by Harrah's:

- Living at or below the poverty line places seniors at high risk of hunger. Poor seniors are more likely to be at risk, but half of all at-risk seniors have incomes above the federal poverty line. Nevada has 31,000 people over age 65 who live at or below the poverty line (\$10,400/year) and another 57,000 people who live on less than \$20,800/year.
- More than two-thirds of all hungry seniors are white, but some ethnic groups are more likely to be at risk of hunger, including African-Americans and Hispanics.
- Being divorced, never married or separated is a risk factor; being married reduces the risk of hunger by about 20%.
- Seniors living with a grandchild are 50% more likely to be at-risk of hunger than those who don't. This is one of the most alarming trends we are seeing – two of our most vulnerable populations – kids and seniors – living together with no visible means of additional financial support. As Dr. Weiss stated earlier, 17% of grandparents are raising their grandchildren, often on Social Security with no extra support.
- Seniors experiencing some form of food insecurity are significantly more likely to have lower intakes of energy and major vitamins; are significantly more likely to be in only fair or poor health, are more likely to have limitations in activities of daily living and spend 60% to 88% less on food relative to needs than those who are not food insecure.

[We will pose one question to you: Is it ok with you that thousands of elderly people in Nevada are at risk of hunger and malnutrition? I believe your answer would be the same as mine – of course not.](#)

As the senior population grows, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of and the state's financial commitment to the programs that provide and deliver congregate meals, home delivered meals and emergency food for our low-income elderly. Addressing the food needs of the elderly will be part of the state plan to address hunger in Nevada. Work will begin this year to complete the draft plan created in 2006.

The Food Bank of Northern Nevada and the Senior Centers throughout the northern part of the state have long partnered to help ensure that low-income elderly people in every community have the food they need. With our new colleague, the Three Square Food Bank in southern Nevada, I believe this tradition will become statewide. Together we have the skills to do the job. The only thing missing is resources adequate to the task.

ENSURING THAT ALL ELDERLY PEOPLE HAVE ADEQUATE NUTRITION IS ONE OF THE BEST INVESTMENTS YOU CAN MAKE IN THEIR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.