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INITIATIVE
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Testimony
of

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on the issue of

**“The Past, Present, and Future of SNAP: The World of Nutrition and the
Role of the Charitable Sector”**

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On behalf of the Texas Hunger Initiative, Baylor University, and nonprofits & faith-based groups across Texas, I would like to thank you, Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and members of the committee, for the invitation to share with you about ways community organizations partner with government agencies to work towards a food-secure Texas.

My name is Dustin Kunz, and I am a research manager for the Texas Hunger Initiative (THI) at Baylor University. Prior to that I have served as an AmeriCorps VISTA and United States Marine. I hold a Master of Divinity degree from Baylor University; I am an ordained Baptist minister and a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I share this because my history demonstrates my purpose and my reason for testifying: in everything I seek the good of the world around me, whether that be for our country, my city, or my faith community. It is exactly that kind of love for the community that inspires every organization I will be sharing about today.

The Texas Hunger Initiative is a collaborative, capacity-building project focused on ensuring that every Texan has access to three nutritious meals a day, seven days a week. THI develops and implements strategies to end hunger through research, policy, education, community organizing, and community development. Headquartered at Baylor University with 12 regional offices across the state, THI convenes federal, state and local government stakeholders with nonprofits, faith communities and business leaders to create an efficient system of accountability that increases food security in Texas. At the heart of THI is the belief that because public challenges (and food insecurity is a good example) are multijurisdictional in nature, “they require a response that exceeds the capabilities and resources of any one department, organization, or jurisdiction, and collaboration, including multijurisdictional partnerships, provides a way to stretch resources, and accomplish more with less.”¹ Public-private partnerships are collaborations that involve a “public agency and either a private firm or nonprofit organization,” and each plays a role in service delivery. Benefits of public-private partnerships include “cost savings [and] enhanced quantity and quality of services” in addition to benefits for the local community, such as “addressing community needs, enhancing trust between participating entities, and increasing citizen support.”²

¹ O’Leary, R., and C. Gerard. 2013. Collaborative governance and leadership: A 2012 survey of local government collaboration. *The Municipal Yearbook 2013*. Washington, DC: ICMA, 57.

² *Ibid*, 251.

Coverage

In Texas, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) administers SNAP and other important programs, including the Children’s Health Insurance Program and hospice services. HHSC maintains several offices and local staff, but Texas is big—really big. We have 254 counties, cover a span of almost 269,000 sq. miles, and have more than 27 million residents.³ To reach the entire state, the HHSC would ordinarily need to either expend an incredible amount of money to maintain physical offices, government personnel, and secure technology to cover an area more than 3,935 times the size of D.C., or else sacrifice access to some of our most vulnerable residents. But I said “ordinarily.” Instead, Texas joined the ranks of a few other forward-looking states and engaged the help of nonprofit organizations across Texas who already exist, relate, and thrive in communities that programs like SNAP seek to help.

Access

Right now, over 1,100 community based organizations in Texas partner with the state to provide application assistance for SNAP & other public benefits programs. These organizations have the option to provide assistance to their *existing clientele* or the *public at large*. This means that, without divulging sensitive information to the general public, shelters can provide application assistance to victims of domestic violence, and at the same time a local church, synagogue, or mosque can help anyone in need. Organizations can be found via the government website, a phone call to a free health and human services information and referral system (in Texas, 2-1-1), or via other community organizations who refer persons in need.⁴

There are two main partnership levels within this program: Self Service and Assistance. At **Self Service** sites, a computer is made available to the public and the online portal is immediately accessible. This is an excellent option for members of the community who are comfortable using computers and have a strong command of the technical language and processes used in the application process, but who do not have access to a reliable Internet connection and a computer with the latest authentication protocols installed.⁵ However, to be

³ Texas Department of State Health Services

⁴ Organizations can opt out of a public listing; this is in some cases crucial for the safety of their clients, as in the case of domestic violence shelters.

⁵ This became particularly important after the OpenSSL exploit became known last year, which left many websites vulnerable to nigh-untraceable hacks. Fortunately, the HHSC computer systems were protected, and there was no interruption in access for Texans using this system.

honest, while I grew up in the age of technology and computers do not generally present a challenge for me, as an AmeriCorps VISTA I found the application jargon difficult to understand in places, especially for a first time applicant looking for short-term benefits. This is why HHSC created the second level of partnership, what we call **Application Assistance** sites. At these sites, applicants can sit down with a staff member or volunteer called a *Navigator*. These Navigators receive free online training from the state that enables them to assist in and answer questions regarding the application process. This reduces errors in applications, saving the government both time and money while also more promptly and efficiently providing resources to the Texans who need them, and it utilizes extant charitable structures to significantly decrease the need for government offices in many places

Who?

The more than 1,100 organizations who partner with the state comprise various constituencies and come from many different sectors, including faith communities and faith-based ministries, Head Start programs, libraries, hospitals & clinics, educational institutions from Pre-K all the way through higher education, *colonia* programs, land-grant universities, homelessness prevention & transitional housing, rehabilitation centers, and domestic violence shelters. Of those 1,100 distinct partners, we know that more than 375 work in health & disability; 300 in education, early childhood intervention, or afterschool programs; more than 60 offer protective or rehabilitative services; and more than 50 offer employment assistance & skill training (and we expect this number to increase significantly very soon). Of the partners, about 200 are faith-based, and many others obtain volunteers for nearby faith communities.

Sector	Category			Total
	Non-Faith Based	Faith-Based	Government	
Education	37	0	0	37
Health & Disability	342	44	2	388
Early Childhood Intervention & Afterschool Enrichment	264	0	0	264
Faith Community & related Ministries	0	69	0	69
Government	3	0	6	9
Community Center	11	1	6	18
Community Development	12	0	0	12
Protective & Rehabilitative	55	4	2	61
Employment & Skill Training	44	3	0	47
Family Services	34	4	0	38
Other	171	65	3	239
Total	973	190	19	1,182

Reliable transportation is one of the most common barriers for economically vulnerable residents. Getting to an agency office for the application itself, to submit appropriate documentation, and in some cases to attend an in-person interview, is difficult when the applicant does not own a reliable car. This results in missed appointments, delayed processing times, and an additional burden not just on the applicant, but on the agency eligibility workers. Our partners exist in 171 counties and 530 ZIP codes. This means, when times get tough and they need a hand up, approximately 3.4 of the 5.26 million (c. 66%) of the presently SNAP eligible Texans could reach out to a partner in their area to apply to, recertify with, or (when things improve) withdraw from the benefits program with the help of the community members who care about them most, all at an incredibly low cost to the state government.

Impact

Since the inception of this program, the percentage of applications filed electronically has risen to 68.1 percent. This means that those who are applying for benefits are doing so in a more efficient, cost effective manner. Direct-service nonprofits have leveraged mutually beneficial partnerships with the state to both build relationships with and better serve their communities' needs. They see the whole person and the whole neighborhood, not just a computation of income percentages, asset limits, and benefit rates. To put this another way, they seek not to determine the applicants' benefits, but how everything might work together to be of benefit to the community.

What does this have to do with Baylor University?

The Texas Hunger Initiative is contracted by the state to perform three key roles: implementation, translation, and evaluation. (I told you I was an ordained Baptist minister, so you should have seen the 3 points coming.)

Since this program began, THI has played a role in its **implementation**. Staff in all 12 of our regional offices and members of Texas Impact (TI) and the Texas Association of Community Health Centers (TACHC) work to *recruit, train, and support* these organizations in their partnerships with the state. Our staff members have relationships with most of these organizations, and so are able to interact with them on a level that would be much more difficult for a state agency to do so.

This, of course, leads into our second role. In these public-private partnerships, there is often a need for **translating** the language of government programs to the nonprofit world and, conversely, we nonprofits have a language all our own, complete with dialects of social services, community centers, and religious groups. THI, TI, and TACHC speak both languages.

Remember too that THI is part of Baylor University, and as such we are in a unique position to do research on public-private partnerships. Using information from the state, field data collected by staff, and the feedback from community organizations working in the trenches, Kathy Krey, PhD, THI Director of Research, and her team pool quantitative and qualitative data to **evaluate** the impact and effectiveness of the program, and to develop evidence-informed best practices for all of the public-private partnerships in which we are engaged.

Boots on the Ground

I have given you a high level overview, but ultimately we are talking today about how public-private partnerships inform the ways that government agencies and private nonprofits might work together to help *people*, so I would like to finish by bringing this conversation much closer to home.

When I returned from Iraq in 2008 I was released from active duty and returned to the United States Marine Corps Reserve. With my degree in theology and philosophy, I was perfectly poised for both seminary and working at a coffee shop, so I did both. Preparing for ministry can be arduous and time-consuming, but also expensive, so while earning my masters of divinity degree, money was tight; at one point I lived for 12 days on cereal and peanut butter & jelly. Under the old benefits application system, my option was this: I could get someone to cover my 8 hour shift (which, at \$7.50/hr would cost me approximately 1/3 of the monthly SNAP maximum allotment) and spend a few hours waiting in a government office for an interview while I fill out a paper application as best I can, attempting to decipher the terms on the page (the first potential source of errors). That application would then go to a government employee, who then has to punch that application into a computer system (the second potential source of simple error), before it is submitted to the state. Everyone I interact with has noble goals: to get me the benefits for which I legally qualify, and to ensure the state program complies fully with the federal regulations.

Under the partnership I have described in brief today, things are a bit different. Instead of going to a government office, I call Will, a minister at Calvary Baptist Church, a congregation a few blocks from my house. "Will," I say, "I'm in a tight spot and I could use some help." Will, with whom I have a personal relationship, schedules a time with me that does not interfere with my job or my education, and tells me about the various ways the church helps people in my situation. If I would like to apply for public benefits, Will sits with me to help me with the application online, as he has been trained to do. Now in the end, if everything goes well, *eventually* I will receive help using either system. But Will's goals are different: Will locates my application assistance within the greater continuum of care within this faith community, and he has a deep, personal interest in seeing my community prosper, and in seeing me move from a place of vulnerability to flourishing, so that instead of being a perpetual SNAP-recipient, I am volunteering at the church to help them care for the rest of my community.

The public sector can do and has done a great deal for economically vulnerable Americans, and without the programs we are talking about, the private sector would have hopes and good intentions, but no way to realize them. But the government can never know me and my needs the way a community based organization in my city can. Agencies execute programs with precision and efficiency, but staff and volunteers at the nonprofit that serves my neighborhood can put those programs in perspective, seeing them as only part of the whole—a crucial but step along the path to self-sufficiency and more full participation in the systems and the life of the greater community.