

May 8, 2012



Rodney Bivens, Founder and Executive Director
Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma

To the U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Nutrition and Horticulture
1300 Longworth Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Regional Food Bank and Oklahoma's vast network of partners involved in the fight against hunger, we thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony during this crucial period concerning food insecurity throughout Oklahoma and across our nation. The Regional Food Bank is the largest private hunger-relief organization in our state, serving 53 counties in central and western Oklahoma, and distributing over 46.2 million pounds of food last year through a network of more than 900 partner agencies and schools. We are also a member of Feeding America, a national network of over 200 food banks working in partnership with 61,000 local agencies providing emergency assistance to 37 million people each year, including 14 million children and 3 million seniors.

The Regional Food Bank currently distributes enough food to feed more than 90,000 Oklahomans every week, which is made possible through generous individual donations, strong corporate partnerships, and USDA Commodities that provide a vital portion of our supply of nutritious produce. Our food bank relies on the tremendous support of community volunteers, who last year donated over 120,000 hours to sort and pack food, saving us more than \$2 million in labor costs. We have a strong commitment to operating efficiently, which helps keep our administrative costs below 4 percent. Ninety-six cents out of every dollar received goes directly to Oklahomans who need it most.

In addition to our distribution to emergency food operations, the Regional Food Bank also operates targeted programs to combat childhood and senior hunger where it exists in our communities. Without proper nutrition, some children are forced to skip school; some have difficulties learning and paying attention in class; and some will drop out of school and be subject to crime, drugs, and other hardships that often exist for those without a strong educational backing. Because we believe it is our moral responsibility to ensure that no child is forced to go to school hungry, our Food for Kids Backpack Program is providing nutritious, yet shelf-stable, kid-friendly food every weekend to more than 12,300 chronically hungry children in 478 elementary schools throughout the 53 counties we serve. Further, we believe that childhood hunger does not end at the elementary level. Therefore, in 2010 we established 43 middle and high school food pantries that are now serving more than 700 adolescents throughout our service area.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Regional Food Bank believes that seniors who have sacrificed tremendously for our country should not have to choose between getting a prescription filled and having enough food to eat. In response, we provide nutrition assistance to more than 4,800 seniors through our Mobile Pantry Program, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and home deliveries. We are also currently in the process of expanding our outreach to seniors through the development of additional fresh food mobile pantries, which will distribute fresh fruits and vegetables to seniors in low-income sections of our service area, providing them with the much-needed nutritional supplement that they otherwise would be unable to afford or access.

Unfortunately, even with the outpouring of community-based support and continuous operational improvements, we are still struggling to meet the increasing need for emergency nutrition assistance. Our partner agencies have reported a 30 to 50 percent increase in demand for emergency food assistance in the most recent fiscal year, and a number of agencies have also recently indicated that 25 percent or more of the families they currently serve are first-time clients that have never had to ask for help until now. Not surprisingly, current statistics on poverty and hunger in Oklahoma reflect these conditions; The U.S. Census Bureau's newly released state-level data from the American Community Survey on Poverty indicates that at least *one out of every six* Oklahomans lives in poverty, which is already set at the low standard of \$23,050 annually for a family of four. Oklahoma's poverty rate remains 14th highest among the states and 1.6 percentage points above the nation as a whole.

Unfortunately, Oklahoma's food insecurity rates also mirror current economic hardships. While the USDA's most recent report on Household Food Security in the United States has indicated that food insecurity rates nationwide have remained roughly fixed at around 14.5 percent since 2009 – which represents an already high portion of American families who often do not know where their next nutritious meal will come from – Oklahoma's rates continue to rise and remain consistently above the national rate at an average of 16.4 percent. Most alarming is that Oklahoma is now tied with Arkansas as the *number one* population for very low food insecurity; this means that 7.5 percent of Oklahoma's households experience hunger and the physical implications that result from malnutrition on a routine basis.

Despite the reality that our nation's economic crisis continues to be experienced deeply both here in Oklahoma and across our nation, the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma continues to strive to protect and uplift our most vulnerable citizens. Over the past year, in response to the heightened need for emergency nutrition assistance across our network, we have responded by stretching our resources through our fundraising capacity, our food sourcing, and through maximizing our efficiency standards to achieve a 27 percent increase in distribution from the previous fiscal year. However, we simply cannot maintain this current level of distribution alongside increasing demands for our services with additional cuts to the crucial safety nets that exist in federal nutrition programs. Hundreds of thousands of Oklahoma's working families, children, seniors, and individuals with disabilities temporarily rely on these programs to ensure that they won't have to worry about malnourishment as another impediment to self-sufficiency in the form of a well-paying job, the pursuit of higher education, affordable healthcare, and other important necessities.

While we understand the tremendous importance in balancing our nation's budget, we are compelled to request that you reject any cuts to federal nutrition programs. As national unemployment rates continue to hover significantly above pre-recession levels, and food insecurity rates persist in mirroring these conditions, the need for nutrition assistance has never been greater in Oklahoma and across our nation. Any cuts to such vital nutrition assistance will increase hardship within the already struggling population served by the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma and further inhibit our organization's ability to keep up with the increasing need for supplemental nutrition. Please take a moment to review some of the federal programs through which we both partner and receive crucial assistance. Without help from these programs, it will not be possible to respond to the overwhelming need we are experiencing:

- **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)** ensures a steady stream of nutritious USDA Commodities for distribution through our nation's charitable food system. The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma has administered this program since 1996. TEFAP is by far our largest federal program, in that it provides us 3 to 9 million pounds of food per year, depending on the year. Last year, 17 percent of the 46.2 million pounds of food we distributed through our network of emergency pantries consisted of TEFAP Commodities; unfortunately, TEFAP declined this year by an astounding 51 percent because stable commodity prices led to fewer bonus purchases. While this time last year we received just over 40 truckloads of TEFAP Commodities, now we expect to see only 23 truckloads. The decrease in vital commodities is a key contributor to our warehouse supply being at nearly decade-long record lows, and the populations we serve going without some of the best quality food available from our network. Without more federal support for TEFAP in the upcoming Farm Bill, both the Regional Food Bank and the entirety of America's food banking system is at risk of falling behind in meeting the needs of Americans struggling to put food on their tables. Accordingly, we respectfully request that the Committee work to provide as much increased mandatory funding for TEFAP as possible, including language in the Farm Bill that clarifies USDA's authority to consider the need for increased food assistance when deciding whether to make commodity purchases under the CCC or Section 32.
- **The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** safeguards millions of families against hunger and provides them with the opportunity to afford not only enough food, but nutritious food. Although SNAP has experienced dramatic growth since 2007 due to our nation's highest unemployment rates in nearly 30 years, the program has never been more efficient. SNAP now boasts an all-time program high with an accuracy rate of 96.19 percent, which is markedly higher than many other prominent benefit programs. SNAP is also efficient in that it largely avoids duplicative efforts; the USDA's 2011 analysis of characteristics of SNAP households found that only 8 percent of all SNAP households also received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, and that only another 4 percent received State General Assistance (GA) benefits. Even more exciting is that SNAP benefits generate local economic activity. For every \$1 spent in SNAP benefits, \$1.73 to \$1.79 is generated in local markets. Though the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma does not partner directly with SNAP, approximately 37 percent of the people we serve are SNAP recipients requiring additional assistance.

SNAP has had tremendous success in Oklahoma, and allows hundreds of thousands of our citizens to be able to achieve greater financial security and self-sufficiency. Currently, over 600,000 Oklahomans are enrolled in SNAP, of whom more than 270,000 are children. These individuals receive an average amount of just \$4.22 per day to help them with their nutritional needs. Much like the majority of working families the Regional Food Bank serves, Oklahoma's SNAP recipients are *not* just looking for a handout – 48.6 percent of households receiving SNAP benefits had earned income in 2010, and the average length of participation in SNAP is currently only about 9 months.

Additionally, SNAP has brought significant economic benefits to Oklahoma, in that SNAP dollars are quickly spent in our local markets, whereas many SNAP recipients would otherwise be forced to turn to already overwhelmed emergency food pantries. In 2010, SNAP created \$1.5 billion in economic activity for Oklahoma. SNAP sales to more than 2,800 grocery stores and other retail outlets totaled \$861 million. Oklahoma's SNAP program is also remarkably efficient. Oklahoma's most recent SNAP accuracy rates mirror national trends with a record-high of 95.78 percent, of which nearly one fourth of all errors result from underpayments. Also notable is that record-high SNAP accuracy rates are also coming at a time when Oklahoma has eliminated the resource asset test; the elimination of the asset test has not only saved considerable time and resources of both the Department of Human Services and qualifying families, but more importantly, has allowed approved families to be able to actually save beyond the \$2,000 or \$3,250 maximum resource limits to go toward a down payment on a house, to buy a reliable car, to save for a college education, and other savings necessities characteristic of the socially-mobile and financially-secure. In all, the SNAP program of today, both in Oklahoma and across the U.S., is allowing families to move beyond the stigma of *low-income* and towards self-sufficiency.

- **The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)** provides a nutritious monthly food package targeted at the specific nutritional needs of low-income seniors. The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma began operating CSFP in January 2010. We receive monthly shipments of this CSFP commodity food, which must be stored and managed separately from TEFAP commodity foods. This assistance goes completely to serve our needy senior population, which is currently at a caseload of 2,982. Due to the increasing needs of Oklahoma's senior population, our senior programs have been in need of significant expansion for quite some time.

- **The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** provides nutritious meals to Oklahoma's children in after school settings. The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma began participating in CACFP in 2010 through a partnership with the Oklahoma Department of Education. We utilize this program for snacks and meals provided through our Kids Cafe program, which provides after-school nutrition and healthy-minded educational activities and tutoring services. We have also recently been approved to use CACFP reimbursement for our school break response to ensure that chronically hungry children can continue to receive adequate nutrition even when school is not in session.

The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma faces a challenging time ahead. Food donations are expected to drop significantly in the upcoming months, and the demand for food shows no signs of leveling off. If, in fact, the demand for food escalates dramatically due to federal budget cuts in nutrition programs, we will be placed in the difficult situation of having a tremendous increase for our services at a time when less food is available. As you know, our situation is not isolated. Our organization's experience mirrors thousands of others across the nation who are attempting to provide the most basic necessities to millions of struggling American citizens.

Without proper nutrition as a solid foundation, children living in poverty will not have the ability to grow in a healthy manner so that they can learn and become productive citizens; parents will not have the capability to protect and provide for their family's stability; struggling adult individuals will not have a firm grasp on the resources needed to thrive; and seniors will find their limited resources stretched beyond their limits. This is why we respectfully ask you to join us in promoting a successful future for our citizens through the protection of vital federal nutrition programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rodney W. Bivens", with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Rodney W. Bivens
Executive Director
Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma

Rodney W. Bivens

Rodney W. Bivens is the founder and executive director of the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma. Bivens founded the Food Bank in 1980, after his work with other non-profit agencies led him to witness what hunger can do to individuals and families, and out of his personal conviction that no one should have to face the tragedy of being without food in a state and nation blessed with so much abundance.

Under his direction, the Regional Food Bank has evolved into a highly respected model for food banks across the country – serving nearly 1,000 schools and charitable feeding programs throughout 53 central and western Oklahoma counties.

Bivens has served on the board of directors and on numerous advisory committees for Feeding America for more than 12 years. He also serves on the National Disaster Relief Task Force where he has been called upon to respond to national disasters like hurricane Katrina and Rita.

Bivens has dedicated his entire professional life to social services and improving the quality of life in central Oklahoma. Before founding the Food Bank, he was Director of Hunger and Aging at Neighborhood Services Organization, and Director of Social Services at the Mary Mahoney Health Center. He was awarded the prestigious John Van Hengel award in 2007 in recognition of his outstanding efforts in the fight against hunger. Most recently, the Oklahoma Center for Non Profits recognized the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma as the Outstanding Non Profit for the state.

Bivens holds a master's degree in social work from the University of Oklahoma and a bachelor's degree in sociology from Southeastern State College. He is a graduate of Class IV of Leadership Oklahoma City & a member of the Alumni Association, former board member of the Homeless Alliance, member of the national Executive Director's Forum, and member of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce.

Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2008.

Name: RODNEY W. BIVENS

Organization you represent (if any): _____

REGIONAL FOOD BANK OF OKLAHOMA, INC.

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2008, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do **NOT** require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: _____ Amount: _____

Source: _____ Amount: _____

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2008, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: USDA (including TEFAP, SFSP, CACFP) Amount: \$ 22,780,971.71 (total since FY 2009)

Source: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Amount: \$ 4,654,975.00 (total since FY 2009)

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: _____

Signature: 

* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: *Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.