

Hunger fighters focus on lessons learned from pandemic

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WACO—Together at the Table Hunger and Poverty Summit speakers focused on lessons learned about food insecurity and nutrition from the COVID-19 pandemic.



The United States mitigated a “hunger disaster” during the pandemic primarily through public and private partnerships, said Jeremy Everett, founding executive director of the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. (Photo / Ken Camp)

In spite of record economic instability, the United States mitigated a “hunger disaster” during the pandemic primarily through public and private partnerships, said Jeremy Everett, founding executive director of the [Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty](#).

For example, the Emergency Meals to You program—which began as a pilot program of the Texas Hunger Initiative in summer 2019 to deliver food boxes to the homes of students in rural Texas—provided 40 million meals to

low-income schoolchildren in 43 states during the pandemic.

The program—which at one point served 5 million meals a week—involved the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, McLane Global and PepsiCo.

“No one organization or sector can end hunger by itself,” Everett told participants at the summit, held on the Baylor University campus. “It takes government, industry, nonprofits, the faith communities and even universities working together.”

‘Leverage the lessons learned’

Stacy Dean, deputy undersecretary for food, nutrition and consumer services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said the pandemic proved Americans can rise to the challenge of meeting urgent needs during an emergency.

Now, she said, the nation must “leverage the lessons learned from the pandemic.”

“Lessons learned from the pandemic can be the springboard for a better tomorrow,” Dean said.

USDA investments in the Pandemic Assistance Program helped mitigate food insecurity during the pandemic, but the global health emergency—as well as supply chain disruptions caused by Russia’s war on Ukraine—made clear the “economic fragility” of the system in place prior to COVID-19 shutdowns, she noted.

Echoing President Joe Biden’s call to “[build back better](#),” USDA pledged to commit more than \$4 billion to strengthen the supply chain and create new market opportunities.

She said USDA has adopted a [food system transformation framework](#) focused on:

- Building a more resilient food supply chain that is more geographically diverse and locally based and that provides better market options both for consumers and producers.
- Creating a fairer and more diversified food system that helps empower food producers and consumers by creating better local market options rather than a market dominated by a handful of multinational companies.
- Making nutritious food more accessible and affordable to consumers.
- Emphasizing equity by creating more economic opportunities for underserved communities.

Goal: End hunger in the U.S. by 2030

The recent White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health made clear the systemic issues that must be addressed moving forward—particularly the link between access to nutritious food and diet-related health issues such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity, Dean said.

She affirmed Biden’s announced goal “to end hunger in America and increase healthy eating and physical activity by 2030, so fewer Americans experience diet-related diseases.”

She highlighted the “five pillars” of the [White House National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition and Health](#):

- Improve food access and affordability.
- Integrate nutrition and health, prioritizing the role of nutrition and food security in overall health.
- Empower all consumers to make and have access to healthy food

choices.

- Support physical activity for all and ensuring that everyone has access to safe places to exercise.
- Enhance nutrition and food security research, particularly gathering data on issues related to equity, access and disparities in food security.

While the goal of eliminating hunger in the United States by 2030 may seem overwhelming and too big to tackle, Dean insisted, “It’s a problem too big not to take on.”

Did food assistance mitigate learning loss?

In a breakout session at the hunger and poverty summit in Waco, Baylor economics professor Pham Hoang Van presented early findings on research examining the impact the Emergency Meals to You program had on student performance during the pandemic.

Test scores in math and reading dropped during the pandemic both nationally and in Texas schools, and the learning loss was greater in low-income schools.

However, the drop in test scores was more pronounced in low-income schools whose students did not receive Emergency Meals to You as compared to those whose students did benefit from the program, Pham noted.

Furthermore, the research indicates positive effects of the Emergency Meals to You program appear most pronounced among elementary school and middle school children.

Pham emphasized the research only points to a correlation and cannot

prove Emergency Meals to You caused better test scores among young students who were part of the program.

“However, the evidence does seem to indicate food assistance mitigated some of the learning loss in the first year of the pandemic,” he said.