

**Senate Ag Committee Testimony**  
**January 31, 2007**

Mr. Chairman, and Senator Chambliss, I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I'm Bill Bolling, Founder and Executive Director of the Atlanta Community Food Bank. I'm here not only representing my food bank and our 800 partner agencies, but America's Second Harvest – The Nation's Food Bank Network - which serves over 50,000 community based organizations.

Mr. Chairman, I have been a food bank director for more than 27 years and have worked in feeding the hungry for more than 32 years. I was one of the first directors in our food bank network and, in fact, helped establish America's Second Harvest 26 years ago. In that time, I have seen a dramatic increase in the problem of hunger and the complexities of hunger and poverty in Atlanta, north Georgia, and around the country. As the problem has grown, the profiles of the people affected by the threat of hunger have changed.

Today, most of the people seeking help are off welfare, and a large percentage actually have a job – or even two jobs. But they are challenged to find affordable housing, adequate health care, *and* enough to eat.

As we look back over the past few years, something interesting has happened. Food bank partner agencies that used to provide *emergency* food relief are now opening their doors to the same families over and over again. Agencies that used to focus only on providing meals or groceries are now broadening their range of services. And this kind of shift isn't easy because the agencies are working with limited resources.

For many low-income working families, food banks and their partner agencies are the last defense against hunger. It's because a network of food banks and relief agencies in their community exists that people are able to face the heart wrenching decision to forgo a trip to the grocery store in order to pay rent or utilities. The people we serve are struggling every day to make ends meet.

The local agency system in North Georgia and around the country is largely comprised of faith-based entities, with three-fourths of our agencies made up of community support from churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. These local relief agencies reflect the very best of America, the broad array of America's social fabric and religious life. And they are a reflection of the public and private sector successfully working together to address a major public health challenge. In fact they are, in my mind, a strong part of our national security system, neighbors knowing and helping their neighbors.

Our agencies rely heavily on volunteers to provide hunger relief, with two-thirds of our partner programs relying entirely on volunteer support. The volunteers in our system are crucial to our work. Using the current minimum wage, the value of volunteer labor in our network in a typical week is estimated at \$8.2 million.

And these volunteers don't just ladle soup or pack food boxes. They provide additional support to needy families. Often times the lack of food is just the presenting problem and the beginning of a relationship toward self sufficiency. Partner agencies provide after school tutoring, community support to seniors, counseling and training for jobs, nutritional counseling, housing support, mental health services, and an array of other support services that transform lives. Using a commodity that our country has in abundance, *food*, we are able to engage, educate, and empower people. This is the essential role which food programs provide everyday - to transform the lives of those most in need.

I understand that in the upcoming farm bill, the choices are going to be tough, and the competing interests many, but in TEFAP and the other commodity donation programs we clearly find mutual and compound interest. Many of the commodities donated to TEFAP, CSFP and other commodity donation programs are acquired to support farm prices and provide a farm safety net. They also serve as a nutrition safety net for millions of our nation's hungry. Moreover, TEFAP commodities offer some of the healthiest and most nutritious food distributed to our agencies. TEFAP commodities stabilize our distribution when private donations are lagging or can help extend private donations enabling the food mix to be more complete.

I know my colleagues on this panel and welfare departments across the country will more specifically testify for the need to enact certain improvements and the sustainability of the Food Stamp Program. I will only add to their testimony that the nation's food banks are committed to continue working with this Committee and welfare departments across the country to improve and strengthen the Food Stamp Program. Food stamps are the cornerstone in the nation's efforts to reduce hunger and help low-income families achieve self-sufficiency.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I appreciate your allowing me to tell my story, and the story of many who are daily engaged in trying to end hunger in our country, one community at a time. Our hope is that the nutrition title of the next Farm Bill will demonstrate our sincere and continued commitment to ending hunger in America. Efforts to increase access to food stamps for so many of those who are eligible but not participating is one of the fastest ways to success in our nation's battle against hunger. With the next Farm Bill, I trust we can also find creative ways to capitalize on the many potential sources of support for TEFAP and CSFP--- government commodities, industry food donations, private charitable donations, infrastructure and administrative grants, increased volunteers, etc. --- so that these programs can operate with dependable and sufficient resources to meet the ever growing need. We must find a way to ensure that our needy families and children, and elderly find a place at our Farm Bill table.

If I was sitting in your shoes with many more requests than resources, my main concern would be whether money committed to feeding people can leverage private money, food, and support. **I am here to tell you it does and it can continue to with your support.** This is a place where resources committed multiply many, many times over, a place where people come together and strengthen and nurture community. This is a place where money and food make a tremendous difference. It is a network of public and private agencies that works on many different levels to transform the lives of both the giver and the receiver. It is a system that *works* on many different levels – and it deserves our full support.

