

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Agronomy & Horticulture -- Faculty Publications

Agronomy and Horticulture Department

2018

Hunger in the Land of Plenty: Local Responses to Food Insecurity in Iowa

Gabrielle E. Roesch-McNally

Northwest Regional Climate Hub, groeschmcnally@fs.fed.us

Jacqueline Ann Nester

Monroe County, Indiana

Andrea D. Basche

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, abasche2@unl.edu

Eric Christianson

Iowa State University Extension, Cedar Rapids, IA

Emily Zimmerman

Iowa State University, emilyz@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/agronomyfacpub>



Part of the [Agricultural Science Commons](#), [Agriculture Commons](#), [Agronomy and Crop Sciences Commons](#), [Botany Commons](#), [Horticulture Commons](#), [Other Plant Sciences Commons](#), and the [Plant Biology Commons](#)

Roesch-McNally, Gabrielle E.; Nester, Jacqueline Ann; Basche, Andrea D.; Christianson, Eric; and Zimmerman, Emily, "Hunger in the Land of Plenty: Local Responses to Food Insecurity in Iowa" (2018). *Agronomy & Horticulture -- Faculty Publications*. 1139.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/agronomyfacpub/1139>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Agronomy and Horticulture Department at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Agronomy & Horticulture -- Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Hunger in the Land of Plenty:
Local Responses to Food Insecurity in Iowa

Gabrielle Roesch-McNally
USDA Northwest Climate Hub,
Corvallis, OR

Jacqueline Nester
Monroe County government,
Bloomington, IN

Andrea Basche
Department of Agronomy & Horticulture,
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, NE

Eric Christianson
Iowa State University Extension,
Cedar Rapids, IA

Emily Zimmerman
Department of Horticulture,
Iowa State University

Published in: *Food and Poverty: Food Insecurity and Food Sovereignty among America's Poor*, ed. Leslie Hossfeld, E. Brooke Kelly, & Julia Waity. (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2018), pp 230-244.

This is a U.S. Government work, not subject to copyright in the United States.

Hunger in the Land of Plenty

Local Responses to Food Insecurity in Iowa

GABRIELLE ROESCH-MCNALLY, JACQUELINE NESTER, ANDREA BASCHE, ERIC CHRISTIANSON, AND EMILY ZIMMERMAN

The answer to poverty is not cheap food, but rather, livable wages. Working for a wage should not be the only thing you do; we must build community through school gardens and reinvigorating food into all we do. People are empowered to eat food with dignity. Food at First here in Ames is a great example of this.

—*Flora and Roesch-McNally 2014, 4*

Story County (estimated population 92,406 in 2013) lies in the heart of central Iowa, a state renowned for its remarkable agricultural productivity. Iowa leads all states for production of corn, soybean, and hogs. Revenues from agricultural products in Iowa total more than \$30 billion annually according the 2012 Agricultural Census (USDA-NASS 2014). This productivity stems from a favorable natural and political environment. The temperate climate, productive soils, and gentle topography are ideal for our production system of commodity agriculture facilitated by federal policies, which include subsidized crop insurance and commodity payments (Horrihan, Lawrence, and Walker 2002). Despite this productivity and political support for commodity production, a very small amount of acreage in Iowa produces food crops such as fruits and vegetables. Within Story County, the amount of cropland dedicated to fruit, vegetable, and nut production per one thousand residents is 2.4 acres, compared to 3.7 acres statewide, which is much lower than the US average of 32 acres per one thousand residents (ISUEO 2014).

Paradoxically, in this land so perfectly suited for agriculture, there is an increasing demand for food assistance. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach (ISUEO) estimates 16,366 people live in poverty in Story County, a 20.1 percent poverty rate, compared to a statewide average of 12.2 percent (2014). ISUEO further estimates that 15.2 percent of Story County residents are food insecure, representing nearly 14,000 individuals. Comparatively, the statewide rate is 12.7 percent (ISUEO 2014).

Compounding the problem, 45 percent of people who are food insecure in Story County do not qualify for direct government assistance because their income

is above the economic threshold set for federal food assistance, and so they depend on charitable efforts to meet their needs. According to Feeding America's statistics, Story County is the most food insecure county in Iowa (Gundersen, Engelhard, and Waxman 2015). The juxtaposition of a productive agricultural system with persistent hunger and need for food assistance is widely apparent in Story County and has inspired community-based efforts to address food needs.

Through this chapter, we analyze the work of Food at First (FAF), a nonprofit that has emerged in response to the need for food assistance in Story County. Their work addresses the food needs of Story County residents by providing a daily free meal program and market as well as the recent development of a community garden. We illustrate the benefits of the FAF effort dedicated to building community-based solutions to hunger and food insecurity through a form of food democracy. We also explore key challenges associated with doing this work, including pragmatic issues of retaining and engaging volunteers. Further, we examine limitations of this model by exploring the underlying causes of food insecurity and how this organization contests as well as perpetuates a neoliberal model of food assistance. This neoliberal focus emphasizes individual responsibility and corporate charitable donations rather than collective, and/or government-level, responsibility for community food insecurity. We hope to raise important questions about how this community-driven work critically improves food security and a broader sense of community while still falling short of addressing poverty and inequality, the underlying reason for food insecurity in Ames and across the country.

Food at First: Feeding Folks, “No Questions Asked”

Food at First, a 501(c)(3) organization, began operation in 2004. This food assistance program distributes food to those in need through a daily free meal program and four weekly market distributions (see Table 17.1). Rather than adopting the title of a “soup kitchen” or “food pantry,” the program emphasizes a community meal program and market that welcomes everyone to participate as recipients, preparers, and growers of food. Food at First exists entirely through the work of hundreds of volunteers who prepare meals and organize food distributions, with only one part-time paid staff member. According to FAF director Chris Martin, twenty-five thousand volunteer hours per year keep FAF functioning. This volunteer time equals twelve full-time paid staff working forty hours per week, providing a value of nearly \$600,000 per year in employee wages.¹ Martin notes that FAF's proximity to Iowa State University (ISU) shapes its success, noting, “Every student that comes to ISU has to do some kind of service along the way.”

Food at First is unique in Story County because it does not require socioeconomic information or photo identification from customers.² All FAF services are open to everyone, and no questions are asked regarding income, employment, or other socioeconomic details. FAF is one of sixteen food assistance programs in Story County (Mid-Iowa Community Action 2014) and is the only food assistance program in the region that does not require photo identification or place constraints on the number of visits. This approach is a less stigmatizing food intervention approach; research on this topic has found that in general, creating less social distance between volunteers and customers can reduce

TABLE 17.1. Highlights of Food at First food security strategies implemented as part of its effort to address hunger in Story County, Iowa

FAF Food Security Strategies	Highlights
Accessible Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anyone can utilize FAF services, no questions asked • Customers can go to as many food distributions and/or meals • Market supports ~40,000 individuals who received food items. Meals: ranges from 30-130 people daily, up to 300-500 for holidays, approximately 24,000 individual meals annually (2014 estimates).
Decentralized Food Sourcing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers pickup surplus food from local businesses, such as Iowa State University, local grocery stores and multinational corporations (e.g., Walmart) • Volunteer run community garden dedicated to growing fresh food for FAF • Local farmers and gardeners donate surplus fruits and vegetables
Diversity of Foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perishable and non-perishable items donated (over 200 tons of food a year, worth nearly \$1 million USD) • Staple items include canned food items, frozen meats, frozen processed foods, rice, pasta, and prepared desserts • Fresh fruits and vegetables from diverse sources
Committed Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Estimated 25,000 annual hours of volunteer labor (Equivalent to 12 full-time employees) • Blurred lines between volunteers and customers • Diverse group of volunteers (churches, schools, friends, families, etc.)
Community Emphasis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers are encouraged to eat/mingle with customers • People come to meals for companionship • Diverse mix of community members who join in at meals and free market

the stigma associated with food banks and other forms of emergency food aid (Molnar et al. 2001; Poppendieck 1999). This finding is supported by our conversations with FAF customers and volunteers, who repeatedly refer to FAF as a family and a community. This is in part because the “no questions asked” policy creates less division between the recipients and volunteers. FAF does not require volunteers to wear T-shirts, nametags, or other identifying materials while working with customers; therefore, there is no clear delineation between those who are serving and those who are being served. As we will explore, these blurred boundaries between volunteer and customer strengthens FAF’s impact. The “no questions asked” policy provides flexibility to deliver emergency assistance in instances of both temporary economic hardships and more protracted poverty, without the barriers of access to formal government food assistance.

Food at First collects no demographic or socioeconomic data from customers, but volunteers do count participation at every meal and market distribution. Daily meal attendance ranges from 30 to 130 customers, with popular community holiday meals reaching over three hundred people. At market distributions, where FAF customers shop for dry goods and perishables that include fresh vegetables and fruit, attendees are asked how many people are in their household to estimate the number of individuals being served. Attendance at the market, open four times a week, has been steadily increasing, from approximately sixteen thousand individuals in 2011 to forty thousand in 2014. We further estimate from average meal attendance that in 2014 FAF provided twenty-four thousand meals. Because FAF does not require photo identification to participate and does not keep track of “unique” visitors, it is difficult to estimate how many of the food insecure within Ames and Story County are reached. However, these figures offer a picture of the overall need among those using FAF’s services.

Food at First has fully integrated gleaned food into their kitchen and pantry, making significant impact in reducing food waste in our community. With entirely volunteer labor, FAF uses two hundred tons of gleaned food (food sourced from many locations that would otherwise go to waste) per year, an estimated US\$1 million in retail annually, for meals and groceries for thousands of people in need (Chris Martin, FAF director, personal communication, May 2, 2015). The type of food available from gleaning highlights the paradox of our food system, in which systematized overproduction and protracted food insecurity exist side by side. More specifically, a tour of the FAF market reveals the kind of food produced in large abundance in the US food system. Much of what is available at FAF is often heavily processed, nutrient-poor, and calorie-rich foods, including large amounts of meat products, as well as bread, pasta, or other carbohydrates. More nutritionally dense options, including fresh and canned produce, are available sporadically. Some of the major food donations come from local grocery stores, which include Walmart, HyVee, Aldi’s, Sam’s Club, and food services at Iowa State University.

Food at First does not have an explicit mission statement. However, from our collective volunteer work with the organization and discussions with key leaders and customers, we see FAF operating within two paradigms, one encompassing community building that values greater food democratization and the other perpetuating a charity-based model that emphasizes a neoliberal approach to emergency food security. In this chapter we refer to neoliberalism as the idea that food insecurity can be managed by charity-driven efforts of private citizens and nongovernmental institutions, which often benefit for-profit corporations through tax deductible surplus food donations. This connects to the broader ideals of neoliberalism that emphasize “a shrinking state mandate, deregulation and privatization,” which prioritizes individual freedom and responsibility (Trnka and Trundle 2014). Food democracy as a concept can take many forms; however, for the purposes of this analysis we recognize it as “the fulfillment of the human right to safe, nutritious food that has been justly [with regard to farmworkers’ rights] produced” (Pesticide Action Network 2015). While we observe that FAF takes both a neoliberal and a food democratization approach to food insecurity, we recognize that neither of these approaches fully describes what FAF is and does.

A tension exists between the goals of the emergency food system that works to manage surplus food and give it away, versus a more systemic challenge of addressing food insecurity and poverty. Food at First is a small actor in a much larger emergency food system, but they do fill a gap in emergency food provision and serve a need for free food while minimizing food waste. Nonetheless, this effort does not fundamentally contest the current neoliberal paradigm because it does not address more systemic causes of hunger and poverty or consistently provide fresh and nutritionally adequate food for those in need at all times of the year. In this chapter we highlight the work of our student group, the Sustainable Agriculture Student Association (SASA), with FAF and the inherent contradictions associated with food insecurity efforts in the heart of the US Corn Belt, where the merits of the food system are regularly purported to be feeding the world (Olmstead 2011).

The efforts presented in this chapter represent our critical reflections as both Food at First volunteers (in meal preparation, food distribution, and garden development) and scholars in the field of sustainable agriculture. As part of this analysis, we conducted semistructured interviews with eleven FAF customers who regularly attend market distributions and/or daily meal service, three FAF board members, and volunteer executive director Chris Martin. We reached out to a broad group of FAF customers and board members who self-selected to speak with us at distributions and meals. We intentionally sought out one board member who has been critical to the success of the FAF garden project and the executive director. It is important to note that the FAF board consists of actively engaged members of the FAF volunteer workforce and also includes people who utilize the free market distribution and/or meals. We seek to analyze our participation in the culture and organization of FAF as active volunteer participants while bringing additional data, analysis, and literature to our exploration of the topic (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). We acknowledge that we have privilege that sets us apart from many FAF customers and volunteers due to our class membership (primarily middle and upper middle class), our race (we all identify as white), and our academic standing as current and former graduate students at Iowa State University. In order to create transparency in our analysis, we shared our preliminary analysis with the FAF board of directors, who are key stakeholders involved in the day-to-day operations of FAF, in an effort to broaden FAF's impacts in the community.

Context for the Emergency Food System

Food is recognized as one of the basic necessities for life and has been recognized as a human right.³ Nonetheless, US food production is embedded in a commodity-oriented food system that is largely focused on national and international markets rather than ensuring local food needs, which is clearly evident right here in Story County, Iowa. For example, approximately one-third of the state's agricultural products, an estimated \$10.4 billion, went to international export in 2013 (USDA-ERS). An estimated 90 percent of all food in Iowa is imported via national and international markets (Tagtow 2008). Thus, to help provide food to the needy without circumventing the market, the government's response has been federal programming to help people purchase food with programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),

Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Child nutrition programs, nutrition programs for seniors, and food distribution programs. Over the last few decades these federal programs have experienced extensive benefit cuts and changes in restrictions, resulting in greater need for private sources of food assistance, such as food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens.

Though private food assistance programs are serving a need, some argue they take the responsibility away from the government to provide a more comprehensive food safety net (Riches 2002). In 2014, the largest network of food banks and pantries, known as Feeding America, diverted and distributed 2.5 billion pounds of otherwise to be disposed of food. Some argue that food waste reduction has become the main focus of food banks, while feeding people in need has become a secondary priority (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005; Winne 2005). Recently, private emergency food systems, such as Food at First, have experienced large increases in demand from the continuing effects of the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009. In the case of FAF, customers coming to the free market distribution from 2011 to 2014 increased 183 percent, from 5,305 in 2011 (representing 16,326 individuals) to 14,993 in 2014 (representing 39,632 individuals). As noted by the director, Chris Martin, “as the number [of people seeking assistance] goes up—and [before] we went from one distribution to two, to three, to four—if those numbers get too high and it’s not manageable, we’ll add a day, and another day” (personal communication, May 2, 2015).

Organizations like Food at First fill a unique gap by helping people who do not qualify or who do not choose to apply for federal programs, as well as those who have experienced cuts in their federal food assistance. Feeding America estimates that 58 percent of their users also receive federal food assistance, suggesting the current federal food assistance benefit level is inadequate (Feeding America 2014). Of note is the timeliness and ability of the private emergency system to adapt to local demand in times of economic change. For instance, between 2006 and 2010, Feeding America noted there was a “46% increase in requests from emergency food assistance” due to the Great Recession (“Feeding America Concerned” 2011, 1). FAF, like other food pantries, is a private charitable response to inadequate public food assistance. In absence of public intervention, FAF helps to address community food insecurity as well as providing additional community benefits.

Benefits of the Food at First Model

The staff here is really nice. They don’t make you feel like you’re poor. Sometimes you can go to places, and it’s like, “Oh, why are you here?” And I mean everyone has their needs. They never ask questions, and they treat you like a human, and that’s nice.

—FAF participant, personal communication, 2015

Nationally, the emergency food system is trending toward centralization, as food distribution becomes concentrated into large and efficient warehousing systems (Campbell et al. 2013). These systems serve as wholesalers between industrial donors and the smaller food pantries, who actually deliver food to users. This centralization creates

a parallel food system that mirrors the same industrial food system that has failed to eliminate hunger, even in the most productive agricultural areas of the Global North, such as central Iowa. One effort that illustrates a community group coming together to produce food locally, rather than through centralization, is the Food at First garden. The garden is a partnership between FAF, the Sustainable Agriculture Student Association (SASA), Trinity Christian Reformed Church, and other community partners. SASA is a student-led organization of graduate students at Iowa State University (ISU) in the Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture. The FAF garden, which started in 2013, provides a venue to connect students in sustainable agriculture with local food production and food insecure community members.

The Food at First garden produces a diverse set of fresh fruits and vegetables to widen the types of food available to FAF recipients. Approximately ten active SASA members and a few community members actively manage the FAF garden. Over sixty people, including other students and community members, participate in weekly workdays in the spring, summer, and fall to maintain the garden. Produce is harvested and used at FAF market distributions once a week, hosted at the church where the garden is located. Prior to the 2015 growing season, SASA members surveyed FAF customers to identify their perceptions of the garden, perceived benefits and challenges, and preferences for produce. The goal was to democratize the selection of produce and to try to include more FAF customers in the work of the garden in an effort to build more buy-in. Many customers spoke about their interest in healthy and nutritional eating, including increasing the availability of fresh vegetables. One participant noted, "I am trying to eat more healthy, a healthier diet, even more fruits and vegetables," and another recalled the garden produce from previous seasons saying, "Well, the tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers, I used all of those, and the onions. . . . I remember walking out and looking at the garden last year." FAF customers often share appreciation for the fresh fruits and vegetables at the monthly meals prepared by SASA.

Food at First is challenging the tendency toward centralization of food support systems by providing a diversity of sources of food and by deliberately involving community partners in the production, distribution, and preparation of food and meals. A large amount of food still comes from the mainstream agricultural/food sector but is accessed through community-based relationships between FAF volunteers and businesses within the community. In addition to partnerships with these businesses, community members bring vegetables from home gardens, and local farmers and community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs donate boxes of produce, and other partners grow food specifically for donation to the program. This diversity of sourcing and involvement of community partners is an attempt to build on the tenets of food democracy via a more locally controlled approach to food acquisition and a more democratized emergency food supply. Additionally, this effort integrates a diverse group of community members into the efforts of FAF, ranging from local larger-scale farmers bringing truckloads of sweet potatoes and sweet corn, to smaller-scale organic farmers dropping off leftover vegetables from the farmers' market.

Community development offered by Food at First is derived from building more local food security through a diversified food-provisioning system, run by a large group of volunteers, with a policy of "no questions asked." One of the biggest successes of

FAF is the power of volunteer work shared by a large but disparate group of local community members, from college students and church leaders to FAF recipients who also volunteer for the organization. Volunteers simply sign up to prepare and cook meals with little top-down management or oversight. Chris Martin, FAF director, noting the success of the community of volunteers, said: “So, you’re taking all that food [estimated at two hundred tons], serving all those people [estimated at forty thousand], with basically 99.9 percent volunteer labor. That’s a success. . . . It’s a hodgepodge of different groups, churches, and service clubs, and you guys [graduate students], and random people off the street that come together and get it done, single-mindedly” (personal communication, May 2, 2015).

Though individuals from organizations (e.g., fraternities, churches, etc.) frequently sign up together, other partnerships often form for a single meal. Our graduate student club has often been joined by other graduate student groups, churches, and undergraduates who assist with preparing and serving meals. This bottom-up approach to preparing and cooking a meal embodies food democracy and community building by creating partnerships and relationships among volunteers and their organizations. Martin, emphasizes the true community among volunteers, stating:

I believe that volunteers get almost as much out of it, if not more, than the shoppers and diners do. I think FAF is filling a need for volunteers, a big need. It did for me. And I’m not alone in that, you know. We all need to be needed and appreciated, need to be valued. . . . You’ve got sort of a family at those meals in the dining room, but you also have a family in the back [with volunteers]. . . . And people are committed to it like its family, in terms of not giving up and so on. (personal communication, May 2, 2015)

In addition to building community among volunteers and partner organizations, Food at First has created a space for community among its clients. This is further evidence of FAF’s role in creating food democracy not only around food access but also around shared experiences, friendships, and support networks. Chris Martin highlighted the importance of this community for customers, saying, “I think a lot of people at the meals come for companionship. We have lots of regulars. It’s like a family. It *is* a family” (personal communication, May 2, 2015). A FAF board member and frequent client echoed Martin’s observation, stating, “When you’re old and when your family’s gone and you have no relatives, you have nothing. This [FAF] was always home for me.” Interviews with clients confirmed these sentiments; one interviewee stated, “That is a big thing, I think friendliness of people, and gosh, when I started, the people who were doing this were just so friendly, and they still are, I mean the volunteers and all, but slowly everyone else has gotten more and more friendly too, I think. It is like we have a community here. We call ourselves a family.” Another interviewee noted, “I think the food is part of it. The social is also part of it. . . . It saves me the issue of, it is not just money, it saves me the issue of having to buy and having to cook every night alone.”

Evocative words used by clients, such as “family” or “community” provide evidence to the inclusiveness and openness that Food at First has successfully cultivated by creating an culture of dignity around food access. Because FAF has fostered such an

environment, most people feel welcomed, accepted, and most importantly, respected and valued as whole human beings at FAF. One client noted that FAF provides support for people with diverse and complicated financial situations, saying, “So I don’t like this idea that you are either terribly poor or you can afford it, you know what I mean. It is not black and white; there is a lot of gray in there, and that is one of the reasons why accepting everyone [at FAF] is the only right approach.” Another echoed this by saying, “[The FAF way] is the only way to do it with dignity because you cannot discriminate; you can’t say ‘you are poor, you are not.’ You know? It just doesn’t work that way.” Finally, another market customer suggested that FAF fills an important gap for food needs among those with middle-income situations: “I’m not poor, but I’ve got two kids in college. You take those college expenses out, you don’t have money left over for yourself. Just knowing that it doesn’t matter, you know . . . I don’t have to walk in dirty and grimy and unemployed. I can still come in as a middle-class person and be respected for that.”

The ability of Food at First to be comprehensive in providing food access to all people, no questions asked, is an important facet of the program’s success. But that is not and should not be the only metric by which this effort is judged. Importantly, by providing a valuable, locally controlled community resource, FAF is actively cultivating and advocating for an increasingly democratic food system through its alliances with local farms, its volunteers and partners, and its customers.

Challenges and Limitations of the Food at First Model

The food industry will make its endless abundance available to food banks only if it can link its waste removal and food surplus utilization needs to its donations. And rather than take the bold steps necessary to end poverty, food insecurity’s ultimate cause, we use our large and complex network of public and private anti-hunger and nutrition programs to manage poverty instead.

—Winne 2008, 175

We have illustrated benefits of the Food at First model for providing access to freshly cooked meals, market distributions, and fresh produce from our community garden, all of which provide food and meet social needs for the Ames community. These connections are powerful and help create the building blocks of community food security (Fisher 2002) in a more democratic manner. However, there are challenges associated with this food security model, the first being pragmatic issues with retaining and engaging volunteers in the ongoing efforts to increase access to healthy foods for those who are food insecure. While the power of the volunteer method is wonderful, Chris Martin has noted that it is “a double-edged sword [because] it’s all volunteer. The problem with volunteers is that you can’t boss them around. They’re not employees; they are there of their own free will. So it’s kind of like herding cats.” Additionally, many of the people that we spoke to suggested that a gap remains in engaging more of the FAF customers in more empowering, and potentially skill-building, roles, including meal preparation, market distributions, or garden work. We and others (e.g., local shelters, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, etc.) have attempted several events

(e.g., cooking and nutrition classes, food processing and preservation events, etc.), but consistent and reliable volunteers remain difficult to identify and retain. It may be unreasonable to expect that many of the people who use the FAF services would also want to garden with us. Many of them struggle with health and disability issues, and most, from our experience, are members of the working poor and as a result have limited time, and perhaps desire, to garden in their free time.

One challenge, as much as opportunity, is the effort to build community engagement with Food at First, particularly inspiring sustained volunteer effort rather than variable and occasional volunteering. In particular, we have struggled with maintaining volunteers in our garden with only a small group of individuals taking leadership roles. To build greater community buy-in we have created community events including garden tours, cooking classes, and help with distribution days at Trinity Christian Reformed Church on Saturdays in the summer to give out vegetables and encourage FAF customers to come to the garden. However, there is a real tension among volunteers, who, according to a FAF board member, “are [normally] flying by the seat of their pants,” to complete extra projects that require additional time, planning, and outreach, because the core volunteer group, including board members, are stretched very thin.

This tension is not unique to our efforts, as other community gardens have also struggled with being relevant to communities (Wright and Middendorf 2008; Ogawa 2009), particularly as food insecure members of the community did not create the FAF garden. We have struggled with creating a space where the efforts for growth and development are not coming from a top-down group of volunteers but rather are informed by the community in a way that is nonhierarchical and participatory. We worry that our efforts will not be sustainable if we cannot find others, particularly those who are not students, to carry on this work that we have personally seen such great value in.

One reason that grassroots volunteer efforts are difficult is because many Americans have individualized the causes and solutions of hunger and food insecurity. This individualization drives a more neoliberal approach to volunteerism, often associated with a charity model of giving back to the community by offering money or limited time rather than committing to the larger effort of addressing the food gap. Mark Winne suggests quite appropriately that “community gardens can help people fill the food gap only when they are motivated and encouraged to do the hard work that forms the building blocks of community” (2008, 66). As we explored in the section above, Food at First has helped to create a sense of community and in many ways a sense of family, but there are challenges that remain with engaging more people in sustained volunteerism. One ray of light is this idea that through the vehicle of FAF, many people, especially young people who volunteer through the local college or high school, gain an appreciation for volunteerism: “It’s possible that that sense of volunteerism can be instilled in that person [who volunteers for FAF]. And it’s possible that that person will go through the rest of their life with the volunteerism mentality. And that’s a good thing. They can teach their kids that, tell their friends about it” (Chris Martin, personal communication, May 2, 2015).

Another challenge for the sustainability of the Food at First model is the reliance on donations from large corporations. These companies donate a tremendous amount

of food, including meat and other fresh foods that would otherwise be destined for the dumpster. These companies utilize the free volunteer labor force of FAF to move that food to market distribution and meal preparation while receiving a tax break for their donations, which requires FAF volunteers to do daily pickups and deliveries of gleaned food. Although many for-profit companies donate immense amounts of food to organizations like FAF, many, particularly Walmart, are infamous for their low wages and propensity toward offering part-time work, making it difficult for families and individuals to transition out of poverty (Goetz and Swaminathan 2006). According to research by Americans for Tax Fairness, Walmart employees in Iowa receive more than \$73 million in annual public assistance (2014).

There is a notable paradox here when corporations can choose to pay their workers low wages, in part because their employees can and often do rely on social safety nets such as Food at First; meanwhile these same corporations receive a tax break for their charitable donation of food waste. In 2013, Walmart donated 1.3 percent of their pretax profits, and while their donations of cash have declined, their donations of food have increased (Frostenson and O’Neil 2013). Ultimately FAF is “at the mercy of what we are given, [and] we don’t have a big budget; we have a very small budget” (FAF board member, personal communication, April 29, 2015). This reliance on what FAF is given by large corporations means a lot of what is donated consists of processed foods with little nutritional value, especially in the winter months, when there are few fresh fruits and vegetables, and instead includes processed canned goods high in sodium and sugar. This reliance on surplus food waste, generated by the market structure, is what runs the emergency food system. This is ultimately a liability because it places organizations like FAF at the whim of corporations and institutions. This situation is a challenge to building greater food democracy and may provide further obstacles for organizations to expose and address root causes of food insecurity and poverty.

Poverty Alleviation and Food Insecurity

I think it’s a sad commentary on society that we have to do what we are doing. It’s ridiculous we have to have a community meal program and food pantries. You know? . . . It’s a stopgap measure; it’s not solving a problem. It’s a Band-Aid, which is great: people need Band-Aids. But you know there are bigger societal issues at play that we can’t really do anything about.

—Chris Martin, *personal communication*, May 2, 2015

More critically, perhaps, than the challenges of engaging volunteers and recipients more meaningfully in the efforts of Food at First is the crisis model of food assistance that is focused on the symptoms of a much larger problem, which is poverty and inequality. This represents a core tension between our efforts at building a more democratically managed and decentralized emergency food response and the limitations of a more neoliberal model of food assistance that emphasizes a charity-based approach. Food systems experts such as Mark Winne claim that “we must seriously examine the role of food banking, which requires that we no longer praise its growth as a sign of

our generosity and charity, but instead recognize it as a symbol of our society's failure to hold government accountable for hunger, food insecurity, and poverty" (2008, 184).

Poverty alleviation is a complex task and one that will require systemic changes to many aspects of our society. Food banks are in a special position to promote a larger conversation about hunger and its root causes (Winne 2008). After being involved in Food at First, we recognize there is a great deal of work that goes into the work of putting a Band-Aid on a broken food system; this includes hours spent picking up food that would otherwise be thrown away, growing the food, preparing it, and sharing it with those who need it. The larger task of empowering people to get out of poverty through job training programs, mental health services, and community efforts to raise awareness about poverty and food insecurity takes time and resources not always available. Empowerment efforts are not easily measured because they cannot be counted in pounds of food or number of meals served, and it takes significantly more time to assess their success. Working at the policy level takes specific skills, abilities, and resources that not all organizations have. There is no one policy solution to end poverty and hunger but rather a combination of many efforts such as addressing the tax code, unequal wage distribution, and entrenched poverty in communities with few jobs or opportunities for livable wages. While many FAF board members acknowledge these challenges, there is hesitancy in addressing these systemic problems because of how overextended volunteers already are. Nonetheless, Food at First has started to rethink the notion of feeding the hungry by focused on finding strategies to improve the types of food available, including fresh fruits and vegetables, by developing a garden space for diverse produce to extend the growing season. The FAF policy of creating less of a division between the "haves" and the "have nots" is another strategy for transforming the traditional charity-based model. The organization fiercely defends its ability to minimize the amount of red tape required of customers so that they can remain a free market, which "should be free in all aspects. . . . [Having to ask questions of customers] to justify [giving out] this food that would otherwise be wasted or thrown out is just ridiculous; it is silly; it is stupid; it is embarrassing" (FAF board member, personal communication, April 29, 2015).

Concluding Reflections

[I think] anyone at FAF would love to not have a FAF. You know, to be put out of business would be a fantastic thing. To solve the problem, to not be needed would be great, but until then, somebody has to help out.

—FAF board member, personal communication, April 29, 2015

Work still needs to be done to address the root causes of hunger and food insecurity in our community rather than solely celebrating charity-based models that are attempting to meet emergency food needs of food insecure Americans. This case study of Food at First finds that a volunteer-based model, although successful on many levels, does not provide a sustainable solution to chronic food insecurity in this paradoxically rich agricultural region. As we have delved into in this work we have learned more about the challenges associated with nutrition and creating greater access to healthy food, which

is essential given the current challenges with obesity, particularly among those who receive food assistance (ISUEO 2014; USDA-FNS 2015).

We have described several instances where the Food at First model counteracts some of the more neoliberal tendencies in the private emergency food system. We realize that these characteristics—such as the “no questions asked” policy, blurred division between customers and volunteers, and emphasis on acquiring food from several different organizations—may not be sustained in the long run. Economic downturns or a continued increase in customers may require Food at First leaders to seek food from governmental sources such as the Food Bank of Iowa, which does require the collection of socioeconomic information from recipients. Additionally, the efforts associated with managing food donations from a broad set of sources, as well as the work that is required of a volunteer-based organization where demand only seems to be increasing, begs the question of where and when poverty alleviation work can be done and whether it can be accomplished by leaders and volunteers who are already working hard to make food available to those in need, no questions asked. This raises the question of not only who should be doing that work, but also the capacity of established organizations like Food at First to expand their operation. Should organizations with limited time and resources, which serve an immediate need in the community, focus more efforts on poverty alleviation? Or is there room for existing and perhaps new organizations to address these complex set of factors? This idea is best articulated by Chris Martin, who said, “More and more I think poverty is the root problem of all of this. . . . It comes down to lack of money, lack of opportunity, lack of resources, lack of education; and then you get into this cyclical, multigenerational hole that people can’t get out of. And so, what’s FAF doing about that? Not really anything” (Personal Communication, May 2, 2015).

Importantly, Martin and the board of directors clearly recognize that Food at First is treating a symptom rather than a root cause; nonetheless, when presented with our analysis and reflections on expanding their vision and operation to more directly address poverty alleviation, Martin and the board of directors were largely defensive. This tension is reflective of a larger challenge associated with a certain amount of path dependency (e.g., doing the same thing because it is what you have always done) that impacts many organizations. This path dependency was reflected in our conversation with board members though language such as “It’s all we can do,” or “It’s what we’ve always done.” For Food at First, the pragmatic task of feeding people by managing a large amount of food waste, with limited volunteer hours, ultimately limits the capacity of the organization to develop innovative approaches or address more systemic causes of hunger because they are caught up in the busy day-to-day work of running the organization. We acknowledge the very real difficulty of actively engaging in the difficult work of meeting community food security needs while also extending a vision for solving much bigger challenges that come with addressing the root causes of hunger.

Despite these critiques and ongoing challenges, Food at First is working to build greater food democracy in the heart of the Corn Belt and has provided an opportunity for many to confront the complexity of the paradox of hunger in the land of plenty. More work must be done, but the lessons learned about building community with a shared purpose of meeting the food and social needs of many in Story County, Iowa,

offer insight on what can be done elsewhere and what still needs to be done across the region and beyond; perhaps efforts such as Food at First's will eventually be "complemented by a comprehensive national food program" that enshrines the right to food and adequate nutrition for all Americans (Powers 2015, 69).

This chapter is dedicated to Sonia Kendrick, a mother, veteran, farmer, and tireless advocate for a more just and accessible food system. She started this work in her backyard and went on to build a local food movement in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which has left an indelible mark on our awareness of and commitment to a more just food system.

NOTES

1. The Independent Sector assessed the value of volunteer labor at \$24.14 per hour in 2016. www.independentsector.org/resource/the-value-of-volunteer-time/.
2. Throughout this chapter we refer to the recipients of FAF meals and free food market distributions as customers. Food at First makes a concerted effort to refer to these individuals as customers rather than recipients to minimize social stigma associated with those who use emergency food services.
3. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has written extensively on the human right to adequate and culturally appropriate food: www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Food/Pages/FoodIndex.aspx.

REFERENCES

- Americans for Tax Fairness. 2014. "Walmart on Tax Day: How Taxpayers Subsidize America's Biggest Employer and Richest Family." Last modified April, 2015. www.americansfortaxfairness.org/files/Walmart-on-Tax-Day-Americans-for-Tax-Fairness-1.pdf.
- Campbell, Elizabeth Catherine, Michelle Ross, and Karen L. Webb. 2013. "Improving the Nutritional Quality of Emergency Food: A Study of Food Bank Organizational Culture, Capacity, and Practices." *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* 8 (3): 261–80.
- Daponte, Beth Osborne, and Shannon Bade. 2006. "How the Private Food Assistance Network Evolved: Interactions between Public and Private Responses to Hunger." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 35 (4): 668–90.
- Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2011. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 12 (1): 273–90.
- Feeding America. 2014. "2014 Annual Report." www.feedingamerica.org/our-response/about-us/annual-report/2014-annual-report.pdf.
- "Feeding America Concerned That Proposed Budget Cuts Could Lead to Increased Food Insecurity." 2011. Feeding America. www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/news-and-updates/press-room/press-releases/feeding-america-concerned-that-proposed-budget-cuts-could-lead-to-increased-food-insecurity-in-the-us.html.
- Fisher, Andrew. 2002. "Community Food Security: A Promising Alternative to the Global Food System." *Community Food Security News*, 5.
- Flora, Cornelia, and Gabrielle Elan Roesch-McNally. 2014. "Sustainable Agriculture and Social Justice: A Conversation with Dr. Cornelia Flora." *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 3 (1): 3.
- Frostenson, S., and M. O'Neil. 2013. "10 Companies That Gave the Most Cash in 2013." *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. www.philanthropy.com/article/10-Companies-That-Gave-the-150507.

- Goetz, S. J., and H. Swaminathan. 2006. "Walmart and County Wide Poverty." *Social Science Quarterly* 87 (2): 211.
- Gundersen, Craig, Emily Engelhard, and Elaine Waxman. 2015. "Map the Meal Gap 2015: Overall Food Insecurity in Iowa by County in 2013." Feeding America. www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/2013/IA_AllCounties_CDs_MMG_2013.pdf.
- Horrigan, Leo, Robert S. Lawrence, and Polly Walker. 2002. "How Sustainable Agriculture Can Address the Environmental and Human Health Harms of Industrial Agriculture." *Environmental Health Perspectives* 110 (5): 445.
- ISUEO. 2014. "Poverty and Food Needs: Story County, Iowa." Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. www.icip.iastate.edu/sites/default/files/poverty/poverty_19169.pdf.
- Mid-Iowa Community Action. 2014. "Story County Resource Guide." www.uwstory.org/sites/uwstory.oneeach.org/files/2014%20Resource%20Guide.pdf.
- Molnar, Joseph J., Patricia A. Duffy, La Toya Claxton, and Conner Bailey. 2001. "Private Food Assistance in a Small Metropolitan Area: Urban Resources and Rural Needs." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 28 (3): 187–209.
- Ogawa, Tomoko. 2009. "Looking at Community Gardens through Neoliberal Lenses." Master's thesis, Iowa State University.
- Olmstead, J. 2011. "Feeding the World? Twelve Years Later, US Grain Exports Are Up, So Too Is Hunger." Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Minneapolis. www.foodmyths.org/reports-resources/feeding-the-world-twelve-years-later-u-s-grain-exports-are-up-so-too-is-hunger/.
- Pesticide Action Network. 2015. "Food Democracy." www.panna.org/issues/food-agriculture/food-democracy.
- Poppendieck, J. 1999. *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. New York: Penguin.
- Powers, J. 2015. "The Right to Food in the US: The Need to Move Away from Charity and Advance towards a Human Rights Approach." *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* 7: 68–69. www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/Watch_2015_Article_11_eng_%20The%20Right%20to%20Food%20in%20the%20US.pdf.
- Riches, Graham. 2002. "Food Banks and Food Security: Welfare Reform, Human Rights and Social Policy. Lessons from Canada?" *Social Policy and Administration* 36 (6): 648–63.
- Tagtow, Angie. 2008. "A Vision for 'Good Food' for Iowa: Linking Community Based Food Systems to Healthy Iowans and Healthy Communities." A report for the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.
- Tarasuk, Valerie, and Joan M. Eakin. 2005. "Food Assistance through 'Surplus' Food: Insights from an Ethnographic Study of Food Bank Work." *Agriculture and Human Values* 22 (2): 177–86.
- Trnka, Susanna, and Catherine Trundle. 2014. "Competing Responsibilities: Moving beyond Neoliberal Responsibilisation." *Anthropological Forum* 24 (2): 136–53.
- USDA-ERS. 2015. "Definitions of Food Security." www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx.
- USDA-FNS. 2015. "Diet Quality of Americans by SNAP Participation Status: Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2007–2010—Summary." USDA Food and Nutrition Service. www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/NHANES-SNAP07-10-Summary.pdf.
- USDA-NASS. 2014. "2014 State Agriculture Overview: Iowa." Last modified May 20, 2015. www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=IOWA.
- Winne, Mark. 2005. "Waste Not, Want Not?" *Agriculture and Human Values* 22 (2): 203–5.
- . 2008. *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty*. Boston: Beacon.
- Wright, Wynne, and Gerard Middendorf, eds. 2008. *The Fight over Food: Producers, Consumers, and Activists Challenge the Global Food System*. Penn State Press.