



**Brief—June 2016**

# End Child Hunger SC Week:

## *A Strategy for Building Awareness and Cultivating Action to Address Child Hunger*

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### **Executive Summary:**

Close to 1 million children experience hunger, referred to as very low food security, annually in the United States, and 24.3% of children in South Carolina were estimated to have experienced food insecurity in 2014.<sup>1,2</sup> Stakeholders and caregivers in the state have identified a lack of awareness that child hunger exists, as well as a lack of knowledge of specific anti-hunger programs available, as primary barriers to creating collective action to address this public health issue and aid in families' ability to access programs.<sup>3,4</sup> End Childhood Hunger SC Week was established in October 2015 by a community-based group as a strategy to increase awareness of the issue and the programs available. This brief describes the rationale and process for developing the week, events held, and lessons learned and recommendations for replication. Awareness weeks could be used as a tool by anti-hunger advocates to elevate the issue in their community and state.

### **Why End Childhood Hunger SC Week?**

**Close to 1 million children experience hunger, referred to as very low food security, annually in the United States, and 24.3% of children in South Carolina were estimated to have experienced food insecurity in 2014.**<sup>1,2</sup> The

Midlands Family Study conducted out of the Center for Research in Nutrition and Health Disparities at the University of South Carolina spoke with close to 550 families living in 8 SC Midlands counties and 45 stakeholders to determine how households and communities can protect children against hunger. Within stakeholder interviews, **lack of awareness** among the public, organizations, and policymakers that child hunger exists were commonly mentioned as barriers to fully addressing the issue; further, building awareness was considered a strategy that could motivate these actors to take action.<sup>3</sup> Stakeholders talked about the need for individuals to first become informed of and acknowledge the fact that child hunger exists. Some stakeholders talked about this being done through a more official public awareness campaign, where the public and elected officials would be educated about child hunger and given a "concise," "clear," "uniform" message and a specific or "clear cut" "call to action" or "ask" about what they can personally do. Stakeholders

*"It needs to become an issue at the forefront that gives political voice to the people to say, 'Hey, listen, we've got a million hungry children in the United States or tens of thousands in South Carolina,' so there needs to be a public awareness program to let people know about that."*

- Midlands Family Study Stakeholder Interviewee

discussed various avenues for creating awareness, such as the media, emotional appeal by “getting the face of the hungry child out there” and volunteering or donating to a cause where they would then meet families and children experiencing child hunger.

In addition to building awareness among the public, organizations, and policymakers about the existence of child hunger, ensuring that families are aware of the anti-hunger programs and

resources that exist in their communities was also seen as important. Lack of awareness of available programs was also identified as a barrier when surveying caregivers. Often caregivers stated not knowing that the program existed or where a site was located close to them as the reason their child did not participate in the Summer Food Service Program—the primary program available in the United States to ensure child hunger does not increase during the months when children are not in school.<sup>4</sup> Other studies have identified similar findings.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

As a result of the Midlands Family Study, a group of multi-sector stakeholders and caregivers formed End Child Hunger SC. This community-based organization aims to build awareness, increase community capacity, and create a coordinated effort to address child hunger in the Midlands region of SC. A strategy to build awareness that the group used in 2015 was to establish End Childhood Hunger SC Week to take place annually during the last week of October.

*“In some communities, it's a matter of building relationships, restoring trust in communities, and then educating about resources in the community. Sometimes communities have within them tremendous resources that they don't even know about.”*

- Midlands Family Study Stakeholder Interviewee

### **Planning End Childhood Hunger SC Week:**

Planning for End Childhood Hunger SC Week started in August 2015. Members for a planning committee were recruited through partners of End Child Hunger SC, led by the Community Organizer of the group. Conference calls were held approximately every other week in which potential events to include, ideas for community leaders to ask to participate in the SNAP Challenge (described later), and how to engage the media were discussed.

The group also sought official recognition of the week from local municipalities. This resulted in two county resolutions and one town proclamation. End Child Hunger SC partners who resided in these counties and town took leadership roles in connecting with their respective elected officials to seek recognition on behalf of the group. Language for the resolution passed in Richland County stated, **“Whereas, the annual End Childhood Hunger SC Week is being established in Columbia, South Carolina, on the last week of October to bring about awareness to the fact that 1 in 4 children in South Carolina live in families where their full food needs are not met; and whereas, our community at large, local and state government officials, state agency stakeholders from non-profits, community based organizations, schools and the faith-based community will unite to reduce the number of youth facing hunger in our schools, neighborhoods and city; and whereas, this week will bring awareness to local, state and national efforts led by United States Department of Agriculture Secretary, Tom Vilsack, to end childhood hunger; and whereas, standing united against childhood hunger, we will bring an increased awareness of the issue of childhood hunger to the Midlands, highlight agencies and individuals currently working towards ending hunger and provide city-wide opportunities for the community to actively fight hunger; and whereas, these efforts will lead to the reduction of hunger for the youth of today and the youth of the future living in Columbia, South Carolina; and now, therefore, be it resolved, that Council Chair Torrey Rush, District 7, and the Richland County Council recognize October 25, 2015 through October 31, 2015 as End Childhood Hunger SC Week and urge all citizens of Richland County to continuously work towards ending childhood hunger.”**

## End Childhood Hunger SC Week Events:

Events of End Childhood Hunger SC Week allowed the group to partner with and highlight other organizations and programs; engage new allies (e.g., businesses and policymakers); and publicize the issue of child hunger and the week through various media channels. Several highlights included the SNAP Challenge, a Community Eligibility Provision press conference, partnerships with the SNAP-Ed program and FoodShare Columbia, and media exposure.

### SNAP Challenge

The SNAP Challenge has been used throughout the US to help simulate what it is like to live on the average amount a recipient of SNAP receives—\$4.25 per day.<sup>8</sup> As a part of End Childhood Hunger SC week, community members and leaders were challenged to see how the close to 800,000 South Carolinians who receive SNAP live on a daily basis, either for the entire month of October or during the designated week. One person who participated reflected on the experience: ***“I did not realize how much a family receiving SNAP had to be conscientious of their food cost. I found myself eating very little to nothing in order to refrain from overspending. I made meals that were inexpensive and unhealthy. It was cheaper for me to cook pasta with sausage or hot dogs and***

***“But a lot of people are just not aware. They think that, well, you know, you have the SNAP program, and if you're hungry go over there and apply. They're not understanding that, if you get three hundred and something dollars a month for food for you and a child and you have no other income, you still have other needs. Or even if you have a part-time job, that's going to decrease the amount of benefits you receive. So it's hard to feed your family with limited SNAP benefits and pay your other expenses ... Just because you receive SNAP does not mean that you're getting all the food that you need.”***

- Midlands Family Study Stakeholder Interviewee

***fries rather lean cuts of meat and fresh fruits and vegetables. Dining out was not an option. A [fast food restaurant] happy meal would have completely blown my budget.”*** Community members were able to appreciate the numerous challenges and trade-offs households receiving SNAP encounter, which could lead to greater empathy and action to address child hunger and help destigmatize and demystify preconceived notions about this nutrition assistance program.

### Community Eligibility Provision Press Conference

The week also highlighted another United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutrition assistance program: the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Schools with a high percentage of children who qualify for free and reduced school meals can “opt-in” to the provision in order to offer meals to all children cost-free. This ensures more children are able to access breakfast and lunch during the school year and cuts down on administrative burdens at the school and school district levels.<sup>9</sup> Currently, 348 out of 694 eligible schools have adopted this option in SC.<sup>10</sup> During End Childhood Hunger SC week, a press conference was held in conjunction with Richland School District One to highlight that they chose, in the 2015-2016 academic year, to implement CEP district-wide at their 45 schools.<sup>11</sup> School administrators, parents, and local elected leaders spoke to the media and community members about the positive impacts this program had made at the school,

household, and child levels, including at the time a 10% increase in school lunch participation and 8% increase in school breakfast. The district's Director of Child Nutrition Services stated: ***"In our district, families have about an average of three children and because of Community Eligibility Provision, it will be estimated that each family will save \$400 per year in breakfast and lunch expenses for their children."*** (Clips from the press conference can be viewed here: [endchildhunger.org/resources/](http://endchildhunger.org/resources/))

### **Partnership with SNAP-Ed**

End Childhood Hunger SC week provided an avenue for the group to partner with SNAP-Ed—the nutrition education arm of the SNAP program that is available in every state. In South Carolina, one of the implementing agencies for the program is the state's Department of Health and Environmental Control. Nutrition educators are well versed in hosting cooking classes because of their involvement in offering the Cooking Matters program. During the week, they provided a family cooking night for families in both participating counties. At the events, families learned how to make healthy cooking choices that are also affordable on a limited budget. The recipe highlighted was a healthy quesadilla consisting of chicken, cheese, spinach, garlic, peppers, and onions. About the event, one of the nutrition educators stated, ***"Usually kids will not eat spinach or some of the other ingredients by itself however, when you present it in a fun way like quesadillas children do not even realize they are eating vegetables."*** This perspective was further illustrated when a seven-year-old elementary student, who attended one of the classes with his mom and dad, enjoyed the event so much that he asked his parents if he could ***"eat the quesadilla every day."***

### **Partnership with FoodShare Columbia**

Another way to highlight the importance of addressing child hunger through ensuring children and their families have ***access to affordable, healthy foods*** was through partnering with FoodShare Columbia. FoodShare Columbia works to ensure ***"good healthy food for all"*** through a Fresh Food Box and nutrition education. Every other week, anyone can purchase a box of fresh produce (retail value approximately \$50) for either \$20 in cash or \$10 in SNAP/EBT; the discounted price for customers shopping with SNAP is due to the program being a SNAP Healthy Bucks site—the state's SNAP healthy incentive program. A long-time End Child Hunger SC partner, the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, who have an international priority to address child hunger, purchased 54 boxes and delivered them to families with a low income that were identified through three local elementary schools. In addition, a Healthy Halloween Fall Festival was also held in conjunction with the regular every-other-Wednesday

Fresh Food Box pick-up day at the main FoodShare Columbia hub.

(Learn more about FoodShare Columbia here: <http://www.sc.edu/nutrition/doc/FoodShareColumbia.pdf>; [www.foodsharesc.org](http://www.foodsharesc.org).)

### **Media Involvement**

Television, radio, and internet media channels were utilized to publicize and reflect on the events of the week; media interviews and articles also offered an opportunity to provide messaging about the issue of child hunger in general, such as rates, causes, and actions people can take to help address it. (Some of these segments and articles can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvzfiKadUdQ&feature=youtu.be>; <http://newirmonews.com/sorority-partners-with-end-child-hunger-sc/>.)



***"In our district, families have about an average of three children and because of Community Eligibility Provision, it will be estimated that each family will save \$400 per year in breakfast and lunch expenses for their children."***

- Director of Child Nutrition Services

## Lessons Learned & Recommendations for Replication:

- ⇒ Start planning early! For End Childhood Hunger SC Week 2016, the group will begin planning in June 2016 to allow time to make it “*bigger and better.*” For instance, a goal of the inaugural week in 2015 was to have faith-based partners provide a child hunger-related message during their Sunday services. Because of pastors planning their sermons earlier than expected (i.e., sometimes more than a month in advance), by the time planning began it was too late to recruit a significant number of faith-based partners to participate; instead, on the short notice, only two participated. Also, earlier planning would allow time to engage more municipalities through the passing of an official resolution or proclamation. Doing so would help expand the geographic reach of the week and provide a tangible way for End Child Hunger SC partners to take a leadership role within their own community.
- ⇒ Partnerships are essential! Use the planning and implementation of the week to engage and celebrate the work of current partners, as well as cultivate new partnerships (e.g., businesses).
- ⇒ Identify opportunities to highlight both local initiatives (e.g., FoodShare Columbia) and public nutrition assistance programs. For example, every state has a SNAP-Ed program and schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision.
- ⇒ Cultivate relationships with media and encourage them to attend events live, as well as request studio interviews. Remember that they need advanced notice—typically about three days.
- ⇒ To gain ideas and logistical recommendations for implementing the SNAP Challenge, you can visit this link: [http://frac.org/pdf/frac\\_101\\_snap\\_challenge\\_toolkit.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/frac_101_snap_challenge_toolkit.pdf)



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