

Food Insecurity in Western US States

Increasing Collaboration between State Agencies and Nonprofit Organizations

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Abstract

This analysis examines how and why many nonprofits and state agencies fighting domestic hunger have increasingly collaborated in unexpected ways. Interviews with nonprofit and state agency leaders in four western US states provide details about these collaborative efforts. Drawing on the concept of collaborative governance, the findings reveal important roles that anti-hunger nonprofits have played for state agencies, serving as experts, co-workers and catalysts for even more collaboration, rather than serving primarily as lobbyists, subcontractors and generic stakeholders. The opportunity for this kind of intimate collaboration emerged from a combination of political and economic developments that changed the incentives for nonprofits and state agencies to work together. The study uses empirical evidence to justify an expansive definition of collaborative governance while also suggesting implications for effective public management in the fight against domestic hunger.

Keywords: food insecurity, hunger, collaborative governance, nonprofit, public policy

Introduction

One in seven American households struggles with food insecurity (Nord *et al.* 2009). Federal response to this problem has come primarily in the form of expanding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as “food stamps.” In recent years, the number of households receiving SNAP has increased to more than 215 million, reflecting both an increase in the number of eligible low-income families and an improvement in methods to enroll eligible families (USDA 2010). This food assistance is delivered through the human service agencies of the fifty states. Agencies follow federal guidelines for distributing these resources, but are granted latitude in how they qualify, disqualify, assist and contact low income people. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) monitors how states perform and rewards those that improve their effectiveness at enrolling eligible households.

Meanwhile, non-governmental nonprofit groups further supplement the diets of low-income families, providing emergency food boxes, soup kitchens, and other feeding programs. From large statewide foodbanks to small community-led pantries, these organizations began contributing to the nutritional safety net well before the Food Stamp Act 1964 was passed, and continued well after, when subsequent administrations rejected the notion that America had a hunger problem (Poppendieck 1998: 103–5). This role of local charities is familiar to most. Less well known are the efforts of larger networks of foodbanks and other anti-hunger advocates who have lobbied state and federal leaders, protested deficient service, and sued human service agencies—all in an effort to improve the generosity of and accessibility to food stamps as well as other federally funded nutrition programs. Eisinger (1998) describes a diverse, loosely affiliated, but sufficiently coordinated network of anti-hunger umbrella organizations that, in the 1990s, were active in lobbying both for improved government programs (e.g. the Food Research and Action Center [FRAC] and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [CBPP]) and for expanding community distribution of emergency food (e.g. America’s Second Harvest). But little is known about the way that state-advocacy groups have interacted with the state agencies that are implementing the federal programs that FRAC, CBPP, and others helped to shape.

In the past two decades, a new kind of collaborative relationship has developed between western state anti-hunger advocates and state agencies seeking to improve access to federally funded nutrition programs. These emerging

relationships appear to be an instance of collaborative governance, an arrangement where state and non-state actors meet to seek agreement on policy questions (Ansell and Gash 2007). However, some of the unique characteristics of the anti-hunger efforts suggest that collaborative governance can go beyond deliberative, collective decision making and result in intimate and interdependent relations between agencies and nonprofits. This study describes these emerging forms of collaboration and suggests several reasons for their emergence. The results yield implications for effective public management in the fight against domestic hunger while justifying a further refinement of the concept of collaborative governance.

Background

The dramatic growth of domestic nonprofit groups and their involvement in policy decisions is well documented (Smith 1999). Since the 1970s, they have grown in number, but they have also changed their scope of activities, increasingly going to work for states, lobbying philanthropies, and expanding their role as advocates (Gronbjerg and Smith 1999; Smith 1999). The roots of this change can be found, in part, in the public's declining confidence in the capacity of federal programs to solve social problems and in the consequent embrace of "New Federalism," a political philosophy that advocates for more state and local governance in place of some federal governance. The publicly articulated rationale for this approach since the early 1970s has been the promise of smaller, focused and efficient government agencies, greater responsiveness to local problems by state and local government, lower taxes, and a greater role for nonprofit nongovernmental groups (Fording *et al.* 2007; Wineburg *et al.* 2008; Beland 2004; Conlan 1998). The contemporary emphasis upon public/private partnerships has become so commonly repeated by all manner of leaders that it is now cliché. Yet actual partnering between government and private groups is a global trend, reflecting a growing consensus that "the government should steer . . . and the private sector should row" (Brinkerhoff 2002).

Interactions between nonprofit groups and government agencies may take several forms. Young (2006) describes three models of nonprofit–government interaction. He suggests that, first, a "supplementary" model of interaction can exist where nonprofits fill a void left by government. As government funding for solving a particular issue decreases, the need for the nonprofits increases. This is the traditional role that foodbanks have played, providing emergency food services when government support was inadequate. Second, a "complementary" model of relationship between nonprofits and government is the experience of many nonprofit groups now being funded by government grants. In these cases, group members work for the state as the nonprofit group contracts to provide various services. In some states, nonprofit groups have been hired to conduct food stamp outreach. Delivery of surplus food made available through the USDA's Emergency Food Assistance Program would be another instance of this kind of relationship. Third, an "adversarial" mode of relating is one where nonprofits "prod governments to make changes in public policy and to maintain accountability to the public." This is the less sanguine, more combative role that some anti-hunger advocates have taken. Young's three-part taxonomy articulates many instances where nonprofits relate with federal, state and local government, but he suggests that other models may exist.

Indeed, another important model has emerged—collaborative governance. Ansell and Gash (2008) define collaborative governance as: "a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets." The quintessential example of such governance is a watershed council convened by a government agency, inviting industry, landowners, additional relevant agencies,

and environmental protection nonprofit groups to confer on policies related to groundwater, rivers, streams, etc. that cross political boundaries.

The approach is neither supplemental, complementary nor adversarial, but connotes a greater sharing in policy setting and implementation. This form of collaboration between agencies and nonprofits has been growing over several decades in many policy sectors, most notably in environmental, resource management and regional planning. Ansell and Gash's study provides 137 examples from these policy sectors, but surprisingly includes no studies on food security, food stamps or related topics. The absence of examples of collaborative governance efforts toward food security suggests that this kind of governance has been rare in the fight against domestic hunger, or that it has yet to be documented.

Ansell and Gash admit that their definition is constrained so they can compare "apples to apples," but they insist on six important criteria that qualify such arrangements as "collaborative governance" (Ansell and Gash 2007: 2). They indicate that for a case to qualify as collaborative governance:

- (1) the forum is initiated by public agencies or institutions, (2) participants in the forum include non-state actors, (3) participants engage directly in decision making and are not merely "consulted" by public agencies, (4) the forum is formally organized and meets collectively, (5) the forum aims to make decisions by consensus ... and (6) the focus of collaboration is on public policy or public management.

These criteria provide a useful set of dimensions for examining interactions between state and non-state actors addressing food insecurity. The degree to which the food insecurity case fits within the notion of shared governance allows us to examine a third possible reason for the absence of food insecurity examples in the Ansell and Gash study. Perhaps their definition is so narrow that it fails to include what could arguably be clear cases of intimate collaboration between agencies and nonprofits, but disqualified by modest exceptions to some of their selection criteria. This paper examines this third possibility.

Constraining the criteria for what qualifies as collaborative governance to the six items listed above distinguishes this form of interaction from mere "cooperation" between nonprofits and state actors. Nonprofit groups may choose to cooperate with government, even under conditions where the latter exerts much more power (e.g. a struggling foodbank might cooperate with burdensome rules handed down by USDA). More solicitous and congenial than rational cooperation would be "collaboration" where powerful agencies offer some opportunities to nonprofits to work together on various, limited issues. If a state human services agency invites, even pays, a group of foodbanks to conduct food stamp outreach, they are "co-laboring," although not necessarily governing in a collaborative way. Collaborative governance, however, is an arrangement that permits multiple parties to deliberate, openly influence one another, and then coordinate efforts. This is clearly a form of interaction that goes beyond acquiescence of a less powerful group to a more powerful group's decisions, and beyond simply agreeing to work on some tasks together. But collaborative governance may go beyond the Ansell and Gash criteria to include other forms of interaction that have been unexamined.

This exploration of the relevance of collaborative governance to anti-hunger efforts is more than quibbling over a few facets of a definition. It also addresses a void in the political science and policy literature. For example, the "policy implementation" academic literature has thoroughly documented how bureaucracy and internal politics impede effective policy implementation (Saetren 2005). But the literature is relatively quiet on the topic of how non-government groups, who likely influenced the policy-setting process, may participate in the actual implementation of those policies. Moreover, political scientists have long known that legislation and administrative rules are not just generated by clever

legislators listening to an articulate electorate. They also derive from policy networks of interest groups and innovations from policy entrepreneurs (see Mintrom 1997). Lobbying organizations and policy think tanks provide policy ideas on issues such as food insecurity. For example, FRAC has for several decades informed and lobbied to persuade national legislators to support legislation such as the Farm Bill, which funds SNAP and which articulates policy on the distribution of excess agricultural commodities. But less well known is the degree to which, at the state level, nonprofits have sought to influence state agencies' implementation of federal food security programs.

This expansion of collaborative governance and of coordinated efforts between agencies and nonprofits in many policy sectors is also the result of multiple political and economic developments. While New Federalism devolved responsibility to states, it also provided new incentives to motivate and liberate states to further delegate responsibility to non-governmental organizations. For example, public rhetoric anticipating the benefits of welfare reform emphasized the role of nonprofit groups replacing big government bureaucracies, promoting a vision of privately contracting nonprofits to deliver many services (the "complementary" model described above).

Two other structural changes likely contributed to further collaboration. First, Al Gore's "reinvention" of government in the 1990s shrunk bureaucracies and programs, and encouraged adoption of management philosophies from private industry, including a greater customer-service orientation. This created new performance expectations and metrics for government agencies which nonprofits could help them achieve. Meanwhile, as the number and size of advocacy organizations within the nonprofit sector grew, so did the level of professionalization and technical expertise among the management and staff of many organizations. As a result, government agency and nonprofit staff were more likely to interact as co-professionals, often with similar levels of education, opening opportunities for nonprofits to provide technical assistance to agencies rather than just the other way around.

But what of the agencies and nonprofits specifically addressing food insecurity? The growing interaction between agencies and nonprofits need not have been harmonious or constructive, nor necessarily motivated by good intentions or careful strategizing. The degree to which they worked closely together was not dictated in federal policy. Thus the sources of a deeper kind of collaborative governance are important to identify for understanding the fight against food insecurity and for examining a model for intimate collaboration perhaps possible in other policy sectors.

The following analysis examines the efforts of government and nonprofit groups to reduce food insecurity, focusing especially on the changing nature of their interaction and relationship with one another. The concept of collaborative governance provides a framework for evaluating those emerging interactions. This examination first answers an empirical question about how agency-nonprofit collaborative efforts against domestic hunger do or do not resemble the existing authoritative definition of collaborative governance, then addresses a larger theoretical and historical question about the roots of increased collaboration, and finally addresses a practical question: can state agencies and advocates continue to collaborate effectively to improve the food security of vulnerable populations?

Data and Methods

This analysis describes results from interviews with seventeen food policy advocates and state administrators in California, Oregon, Washington and Alaska (three, three, nine and two respondents, respectively). These four West Coast states do not constitute a representative sample of the US population, but they differ dramatically in terms of their population composition, size, rural/urban geography, and economic and political history since welfare reform. They also differ in the ways state agencies responded under welfare reform. The degree to which observations made about these four states are generalizable to other states is discussed in the concluding paragraphs.

Seven nonprofits in the four states participated. Several of the respondents were publicly known food policy advocates, and others are, or were, leaders in social service agencies in each state. Initial contacts alerted me to other advocates and experts. I also initiated with other people who were not identified by interviewees to ensure as many different perspectives as possible. All interviews were conducted by telephone in 2007 and early 2008. The interviews were semi-structured, asking about the history of interactions between agencies and nonprofit organizations addressing hunger and documenting the stories they told about meetings, conversations and strategies in their organizations in the 1990s and early 2000s. The analysis of interview notes categorized references to themes related to the ways that state agencies and nonprofit organizations interacted during that period.

The advocates and agency leaders had a minimum of six years' experience working on food security issues, while a few had as many as twenty. Two had been food stamp recipients themselves before working as advocates. Some had participated in food stamp outreach and foodbank organization in the late 1980s, while others, still in their thirties, had devoted most of their recent post-college years to advocacy. Agency personnel recounted decades of experience with food stamp programs working in county offices and/or administering programs for an entire state.

The seven nonprofits in this study had roots in advocacy group networks that had been emerging since the 1970s (Berg 2008). Review of websites and annual reports showed that the nonprofit groups grew in size and formal structure in the early 1990s. Their organizational development appears to have been spurred significantly by debates about welfare reform. By the time welfare reform legislation was signed in 1996, large well organized foodbanks existed in all four states, and policy advocacy groups were operating in all but Alaska.

A non-exhaustive review of several of the nonprofits reveals the degree of formal structure, size of budget, and staffing, suggesting the degree to which they have been able, as experts and professionals, to interact formally with state agencies. It is immediately clear that these are not local food pantries sending well-intended citizens to testify to legislative committees. The California Association of Foodbanks (CAFB) coordinates services of county foodbanks throughout the state. In 2009, the CAFB had a dozen full and part-time employees, and spent \$1.2 million on salaries, benefits and contract services. The California Food Policy Advocates network likewise employs a dozen people, seven of whom, in 2010, held graduate degrees. In 2007, the Oregon Foodbank distributed food to twenty regional foodbanks that in turn distributed food to more than 300 local sites. That year, their budget for compensation and related expenses for dozens of employees exceeded \$4.6 million. The Oregon Hunger Relief Taskforce employs almost a dozen college-trained advocates and specialists. The taskforce is unusual in the United States because it was legislated into existence in 1989, when the Oregon legislature decreed that "All persons have the right to be free from hunger" (Oregon Revised Statutes 2009). As a group, these and other nonprofit organizations are professional and formal, and have had expertise and resources to work with state agencies on food security issues.

The state agencies addressing food insecurity issues for Alaska, Washington, California and Oregon go by different names and are structured differently, but being public agencies they are of course highly bureaucratic. To outsiders, such agencies seem bent upon doing things in the most slow, inefficient and dispiriting way possible. Historically, hunger advocates, clients and rejected applicants for benefits have criticized state employees, ranging from the front-line caseworker to the top-level administrator, complaining that they are out of touch, clueless, or careerist in their orientation. However, by reputation (articulated by hunger advocates in this study) and by observation from these interviews, many administrators, down to the level of case worker, are sympathetic, creative and tireless employees who are serious about delivering services to vulnerable populations.

None of the participants requested anonymity; nonetheless, they have all been described simply as advocates or agency leaders in different states. In some cases, identities might be surmised, but in most cases, informants who were not interviewed for the study but are within the advocacy community were unable to identify the participants correctly. Since the time of the interviews, several of the participants have moved on to work in other nonprofit groups or agencies. Admittedly some of the most criticized agency leaders, social workers and advocates were unavailable for this study, but those who participated freely criticized and complimented others who did and did not participate, suggesting that these respondents' insights reflect a realistic and multifaceted story rather than a stylized, overly optimistic story of easy collaboration.

Results

Three important criteria for identifying instances of shared governance are (a) there must at least be state and non-state actors, (b) meeting in an organized and formal way (c) to make decisions by consensus (d) on public policy (items 2, 4, 5, and 6 in Ansell and Gash's definition). Is there evidence of such collaboration in the fight against domestic hunger?

Evidence for Collaborative Governance in the Fight against Food Insecurity

When describing the nature of state agency–nonprofit interactions over the past two decades, nonprofit and agency respondents agreed that collaboration had increased significantly since the mid-1990s and it was difficult at first. The depth and breadth of collaboration is immediately apparent in the large number of groups with which respondents said they now meet and talk. Hunger advocates, for example, can do more than just name the few agency leaders they need to persuade, but instead describe regularly scheduled consultations, and networks of agencies and private nonprofit groups that work together. For example:

We work closely with the California Nutrition Network forum where DHS, DSS, WIC, USDA, etc. all get together every quarter. Here we meet to talk about the data, best practices, trends, etc. (California Advocate)

The Inter-Agency Coordinating Council on Hunger was created by statute to deal with hunger ... It was useful to have this council which included state department heads, to try to coordinate the state's efforts, as well as ecumenical ministries and the foodbank... (Oregon Advocate)

The extent of this collaboration varies across the states analyzed. Leaders in other states regard Oregon as having the highest level of collaborative interaction between advocates and state agencies, with Washington and California having fewer institutionalized means of cooperation, followed distantly by Alaska. Oregon advocates recounted stories of sharing a glass of wine with leaders of the Department of Human Services, while one state agency leader referred to an "incredible companionship and friendship" with a hunger advocate. But, less congenially, respondents in California talked about state agencies as being "an abyss," some Washington advocates talked about agency leaders "not getting it," and one Alaska advocate described earlier experiences working with "the state agency folks" as being "like climbing a very steep mountain." However, respondents in all four states recounted stories of greater communication, coordination of services and aligned efforts to take advantage of unexpected opportunities, whether those be buying and distributing excess canned salmon in Alaska or obtaining foundation funds to develop food stamp application websites in Washington.

In every state, respondents pointed out early tensions as hunger advocacy groups and state agencies began to meet more regularly. Many of these tensions resulted from the adversarial interactions that had been taking place between advocacy groups complaining about poor service in county welfare offices, such as the Oregon advocate who

had been “building a case against the caseworkers.” Another described her early approach as “in your face, sarcastic,” and “having a chip on my shoulder.” Advocates recounted a shift in their approach, described by one as “trying to be more collegial.”

One advocate described the process in personal terms:

I’m so much more effective having a relationship rather than having them think of me as a trouble maker. Working on a committee together you can’t help but see one another. For example, one agency leader I first saw as a middle class policy wonk. But then she showed up with kids, hair down, dressin’ down . . . and visiting branch offices to see if offices treated her a certain way. I was flabbergasted—she really does care!

Early efforts at improved collaboration were difficult, with respondents talking about “terribly hard meetings way back when,” where there was “tension in the room” and it was “uncomfortable.” One California advocate described the reasons for early difficulties and the process of creating regular meetings with agency leaders:

It was awkward at first. Historically, our contact with them was Legal Services suing the state for not doing something . . . So, it took this sort of forum to create community . . . We still have disagreements but they are much more civil . . . This is a safe place where we’ll sit in the room with DSS staff to brainstorm. . . . You could say it’s more symbiotic. (California Advocate)

The concept of a symbiotic relationship between western state agencies and nonprofit groups begins to capture the kinds of complex interactions that have emerged over the past two decades. The first few criteria of collaborative governance (who meets, the formality of the meetings, and the pursuit of agreement) are certainly met in the fight against food insecurity. But the degree of interaction appears to go beyond only formal deliberations, with agency and nonprofit leaders also engaged in efforts to strengthen informal ties. The degree to which this took place differs across states.

New Forms of Collaboration

Ansell and Gash’s definition of collaborative governance further suggests that (a) the forum is initiated by public agencies and (b) that participants engage directly in decision making and are not merely consulted (items 1 and 3 in their definition). The interview data reveal something different. In the fight against domestic hunger, it has been the nonprofits that have often convened the meetings, and participants engage far beyond consultation and decision making. In some cases, the nonprofits have been the leaders helping agencies meet their performance goals.

Many of the nonprofit leaders now experience legitimate, institutionalized access for deliberation with agency leaders, but they also have access and authority within state agencies as experts, specialists, fundraisers, motivators and relational bridges between various groups. The interview data with nonprofit and state agency leaders illustrate these newer forms of collaboration that appear to go beyond a constrained definition of collaborative governance.

Policy and Organizational Experts

While state agencies toiled under conditions of uncertainty, confusion and bureaucratic inertia in the late 1990s, hunger advocates increasingly served as experts on policy implementation options, organizational efficiency and access to services. State agencies in some cases still depend on this expertise to know how they can best serve vulnerable populations and how to avoid being penalized by the federal government for performing poorly. Anti-hunger nonprofits helped them make sense of the available complex possibilities and subsequently assisted them in improving the delivery of services at the local level.

To argue that state agencies received guidance from nonprofits regarding policy options does not mean that agency leaders did not understand new federal legislation that emerged under welfare reform. However, they appear to have been unaware of the full array of possibilities before them. Moreover, the federal program's complexity, combined with the flexibility afforded by the new federal legislation, allowed for a somewhat risky creativity unlikely to be embraced by state agency leaders whose career experience to that point was in a very different program.

In Oregon, one advocate reported how new flexibility created opportunities for change:

In early 1999, we tried to change time limits on receipt (i.e. how many months of food stamps were allowed for childless adults). But there are these provisions for certain exceptions for people in areas of high unemployment—a pot of exemptions that states could use. Oregon had not been using its exemptions, so they built up to be pretty large (that is, the “pot” of unused exemptions). Since Oregon had lots of counties with high unemployment, we pointed out that you could exempt all childless adults because of high unemployment and high numbers of rural residents.

Another Oregon advocate immodestly claimed:

We were prepared ... we knew what states *could* do, so we were often teaching DHS how waivers worked ... but a DHS (state agency) leader spun it differently, saying we figured out some of our options with the support of ... advocacy groups.

Whoever gets the credit for leading the way, the leaders in other states point to Oregon for its success in quickly employing a particularly powerful policy option known as “categorical eligibility.” An advocate in Oregon explained how they assisted the state in taking advantage of this opportunity:

Categorical eligibility was part of welfare reform, where Congress said states could have flexibility to match up various public assistance programs. So if you want to give someone a service provided via TANF, you could use program rules on other programs ... You can write your own eligibility criteria within certain boundaries ... For example, you could have no more than \$2000 in assets, including the value of your car ... Congress and others were seeing that the vehicle rules were really counterproductive. The state saw this too but they also were concerned with their error rates, for fear of being dinged financially ... They said, “we like this because it means we’ll no longer have to calculate how many assets people have because that’s where we often have errors.”

Another example of advocates assisting agencies in interpreting rules is found in California. County welfare offices in California have some options for deviating from a strict interpretation of state agency rules. An advocate reported the following story of how her organization helped county offices teach one another about policy implementation options:

We got seven counties to buy into the practice of proactively letting clients know they could interview over the phone (rather than come to the office to apply for services). Offices thought they had to comply with the finger image requirements, but some of the exceptions (to that rule) were not clear and the clarifications provided by the state are not very clear. *We* [respondent’s emphasis] were in charge of a food stamp panel at a conference, and we had the counties that were not requiring people to come in say publicly that they were doing this. So now other counties would know they could do it too.

State-level advocacy groups possess another useful resource to share with agencies. They have connections to larger national think tanks and advocacy groups, where much of the expertise is developed.

It helped that we were connected to some think tanks in DC such as the Center for Budget and Policy priorities. They gave us ideas about how to use exemption programs to get childless adults exemption ... They were dogged about digging out polls, things to take advantage of and how to strategize. (Oregon advocate)

Being part of the Western Regional Anti-Hunger Coalition has helped ... We get ideas there. (Washington advocate)

Some advocates have informally, and sometimes unintentionally, become unpaid consultants to state agencies on food stamp policy and options. One advocate reported that “no one knows more about what’s going on with food stamps than I do...”, an assertion supported by the following statement:

Recently I had an e-mail forwarded to me by one county analyst, where one county leader urged another county person to talk to me because I was the best resource. So one county is referring another county to me, and not to the state nor to another county. She’s right, I do have more information.

In addition to sharing expertise on policy implementation options, advocates have increasingly delivered to agencies invited feedback about agency effectiveness in providing services. Historically, American welfare offices have been roundly criticized for unprofessional and demeaning service to poor people, and this criticism has often come from hunger advocacy groups. But respondents report significant changes in the degree to which agencies have invited the criticism and, therefore, the way in which it is delivered. For example, in the mid-1990s the Oregon Foodbank and the Hunger Task Force each hired an advocate, both whom had been food stamp recipients, to identify barriers to food stamp enrollment in local offices. The Task Force advocate’s role may be described as “state sponsored advocacy,” paid for with tax revenues to hold the state’s welfare offices accountable to providing quality services to applicants. She recounted the kinds of problems she sought to address:

The environment at the food stamp office was like this. It was a cattle call. You’d sit there for hours, receive horrible treatment by workers. There was no wall to lean on because it was so crowded. It was packed because so many kids were there ... You’d have to show up by 7:00 am to get on a list by 7:30 and the workers would come in and visibly blanch, probably thinking “look at all of them” ... Then, you’d have to come back the next day.

One Oregon agency leader concurred:

We started looking at how people were treated when they came in the door. It used to be you “take a number,” and sometimes there would be lines half a block long. The Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force could help us see where there were problems, the big issues with our system. Sometimes it was not very pleasant to see the truth.

State agencies sometimes have recognized their need to “see the truth” and correct problems before federal auditors arrive. For example, a food stamp expert in California described one of her functions as follows:

We can help them (county offices) before they get reported. We are able to know what happened, and have them fix it before the USDA calls ... So, our role is to try to organize client feedback, look for similarities across counties, and try to improve service. So we are an applied observer.

Data Managers and Analysts

Respondents also described a function for nonprofits of providing evidence of overall need (i.e. quantifying the scope of the food insecurity problem) and providing budgetary rationale for improving food stamp enrollment. For example, in the late 1990s, when Oregon was ranked by the USDA as the state with the highest rate of “hunger” (very low food security), the news was met with disbelief by state legislators and the general public. Hunger advocates in Oregon immediately needed to address the concern, and “the OCPP [Oregon Center for Public Policy] was able to successfully fend off the state’s initial reaction, to give the numbers credibility with media and policy makers.” A foodbank leader in Oregon pointed to the role of the “wonky” OCPP and a state university to help validate the numbers. The OCPP, along with other advocacy groups, also helped persuade state government to pay for the addition of hunger questions to a larger health survey.

Similarly, in California, hunger policy advocates took the lead obtaining trustworthy data about food insecurity, working with a state university, and securing the money needed to add questions to a health survey for that state:

We worked hard to get this in place. We knew we had a hunger problem and had national figures, but didn’t have a way of showing it was relevant for *all* policy makers. People thought maybe it was only an urban issue. So we asked the legislature to put [questions] ... on the state health survey ... Now many legislators are recognizing the presence of hunger in their counties and districts. We had key members on federal Congressional committees and showed them that they had high food insecurity in their districts. Local data alongside local Congressional representatives’ faces means that a local leader is attached to a local problem.

As one California advocate indicated, in the absence of good data describing the situation:

There is no incentive for legislators or agencies to identify that (a) the problem exists, (b) the problem is worse than we thought, or (c) we are doing a poor job addressing the problem. Any of those insights puts new pressure on leaders and agencies to do more.

In addition to counting, documenting, and mapping, nonprofits have also provided the economic rationale for expanding the state food stamp program. Because food stamp benefits are funded by federal dollars, failure to enroll every eligible person reduces the number of federal dollars that could enter a state’s economy via food purchases. A policy advocate in California described:

The math works here. A professor at the University of California computed that 40 percent of the food benefit savings was transferred into shoes, clothes, etc. So we saved a legislative bill by saying “you are turning away this revenue generator.”

Advocates as Bridges

New Federalism promised greater efficiency of government by devolving more responsibility to state and local governments, and relying more on nonprofits and philanthropies. However, governments at the state and local level still need to relate to each other, and to the federal government, which exerts auditing oversight. Meanwhile, New Federalism called upon nonprofits to apply for limited federal dollars for programs and to rely increasingly upon private philanthropy to support their work. But, in this new policy environment, philanthropic organizations have served an unexpected role in how they influence government agencies, a process assisted by the nonprofits. In many cases, nonprofits have served as bridges between government agencies, between units within a single agency, or between government agencies and private philanthropies.

A word repeated in many conversations with advocates and agency leaders was “silos,” where respondents criticized how one state agency would not talk to another, or how state and federal programs failed to interact, or how different county offices within the same state would fail to learn from one another’s successes and failures. Nonprofits have had an active role in challenging these gulfs between bureaucratic units.

Many nonprofits have convened the meetings that have facilitated coordination and communication between agencies. Different advocacy leaders in California described their activities:

When I got here we started a joint forum with [state] departments of social services.

We helped put together a discussion with county offices about a pilot project, based on another state’s experiment where a pre-credited card was made immediately available.

One of the things I want to do is get groups together. For example, two Bay Area counties simultaneously came up with an idea to help the homeless get food stamps . . . Now, [a group of service providers] in Los Angeles, who work on Skid Row are going to be on a conference call so they can learn from the Bay Area counties.

Part of bridging government to government is serving as an informal communicator between offices within the same agency. A California food stamp advocate said:

I ask a dumb question, or keep saying, “Hey, it would be really great if . . .” Or I’ll say, “San Francisco or LA has it now . . . why not you?” So I apply pressure, pushing people along.

An explicit dimension of the New Federalist approach was to open up opportunities for private philanthropic groups to fund efforts to tackle social problems that previously were delegated to government agencies. Anti-hunger groups such as state foodbanks or policy advocates became a bridge by which philanthropies began to interact with state agencies.

One California advocate described the general trend in these terms:

We had to move the funding world along for funding advocacy. It used to be hard to get funders to do more than charity. Then they at least helped fund outreach [for government aid]. But they were less comfortable with policy advocacy. It was a delicate dance. . . . They may not want to “lobby” per se, but they have increasingly begun to support “education of public policy makers.”

A Washington advocate provided another example when discussing the 2002 Farm Bill legislation, which included many improvements in how states would be rewarded for increased food stamp participation rates:

This was a great time for the advocacy community where we were actually working with administrators. In preparation for that [the Farm Bill], we in the Western Region Anti-Hunger Consortium had a big grant from the Packard Foundation that allowed us to fly these guys [administrators of state agencies] in for meetings in 2000 and 2001 to figure out what we could agree on regionally. And we could include FRAC and other advocacy groups at the national level too in preparation for the Farm Bill.

The Gates and Allen foundations have played a role in bringing together nonprofits and agencies, or in challenging state agencies to meet their obligations:

This is a new thing, having Gates and Allen pushing government agencies to move, to change. In the past, philanthropy didn't want to duplicate the work of agencies, or do work that the state should be doing. Now, they're pressuring them to do what they should. (Washington Advocate)

Indeed, in 2006 the Gates Foundation paid to convene a group of agency and nonprofit leaders from Washington at the Oregon Foodbank to challenge Washington leaders of agencies and nonprofits to learn from the relatively high levels of collaboration between such groups in Oregon.

The depth and complexity of the relationship between state agencies and nonprofit advocacy groups illustrates a form of collaborative governance that goes beyond roundtable discussions convened by government agencies. In the fight against food insecurity, lines have become blurred between private and public groups, with professionalized nonprofits often training, motivating, coercing and linking government workers, and serving as further catalysts for collaboration between philanthropies and government. Contrary to the definitional requirement that agencies call the meeting, nonprofit advocates addressing hunger have been the conveners and catalysts that bring groups together.

Historical & Organizational Sources of Collaborative Governance

The growth of collaboration and the changing nature of it cannot be attributed to people simply awakening to the wisdom of working together. When asked to reflect on the reasons for the changes, hunger advocates and agency leaders recall a sense of crisis, emergency and alarm, with the 1996 signing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the primary legislation that reformed welfare. PRWORA changed incentives, sanctions, goals and requirements for bureaucracies and clients, as well as criteria for agency evaluation. Hunger advocates refer to this as a time when “the red lights went on” because on the heels of PRWORA, food stamp enrollment fell quickly. One Washington advocate recalled “Draconian measures” that were instituted upon low-income people, and an Oregon advocate ruefully remembered it as “the Contract on America.”

The linkage between PRWORA and the decline of food stamp participation rates is still clear in the minds of advocates. One respondent claimed that “half of the savings from welfare reform was from damage to foods stamps.” Indeed, it would seem that to tell the story of changes in food insecurity and food stamps, one must root it in the administration of welfare reform and not just in USDA statistics or suddenly articulate nonprofit groups. The food stamp enrollment rate did indeed plummet as soon as welfare reform became law in 1996 (Fingold 2008), in large part because clients and state agency workers incorrectly believed that low-income families lost food stamp benefits as part of welfare reform. This confusion created an opportunity for advocates to intervene.

A second structural source of collaboration was identified by one advocate who pointed to another incentive for nonprofits and agencies to work more closely together. She recalled that legal changes reduced opportunities for nonprofit groups to sue state agencies. Another nonprofit leader's observation supported this idea: “It's hard to pinpoint what got us to collaborate, but one thing is that we no longer litigate. We work with them.”

Finally, although respondents did not comment directly on the growing customer orientation in the delivery of social services as a source of intimate collaboration, they did emphasize that one of their greatest contributions was in the efforts to assist agencies at improving service delivery. While the National Partnership for Reinventing Government was pressuring federal agencies to create customer service standards, hunger advocates stepped in to assist with evaluation and implementation of similar efforts at the state level.

Structural circumstances such as performance incentives, competition, confusion, crisis and reduced budgets in the public sector, along with greater sophistication and capacity among private nonprofit advocacy groups appear to have created conditions for this intimate form of collaboration.

Assessing the Impact of Greater Collaboration

Can it be argued that greater levels of collaboration between nonprofits and agencies yield better outcomes for vulnerable populations in various states? With the available data, it cannot be statistically demonstrated. However, there appears to be anecdotal evidence for such a claim.

In Oregon, reputed by advocates in others states to be the most innovative and collaborative state for dealing with food insecurity, food stamp enrollment increased more dramatically than other states. The apparent result was rapidly declining food insecurity and hunger, even during the difficult economic times of the early 2000s. By 2003, the new governor focused attention on the problem of hunger, advocating often for the Oregon Foodbank, living for one week on food stamps, and using the message that nonprofits had been promoting, that “hunger is an income issue.” By 2003, Oregon had the highest food stamp participation rates and the fastest improvement in that rate (USDA 2005).

Institutionalized collaboration, even before the new opportunities inspired by welfare reform, appears to have prepared the state for dealing with rising rates of hunger. The Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force had been at work prior to PRWORA, linking the Oregon Foodbank, nonprofit groups, and state agencies. The InterAgency Coordinating Council on Hunger (ICCH), was authorized but not active prior to PRWORA, but was reanimated after PRWORA and became an arena for advocates, social service agency leaders, and low-income clients to interact. One advocate recounted that “Oregon had committed itself to ending hunger before the USDA was really measuring it” and that the state legislature had passed a statute establishing the ICCH and the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force with a mandate to eliminate hunger. Another Oregon advocate believed that Oregon’s quick success in dealing with a high hunger rate was because “we were prepared. . . ; before the [economic] downturn hit [in 2001], outreach was already underway.”

Washington reported slower progress in improving collaboration between agencies and nonprofits. Without the institutionalized communication or coordinated food stamp outreach of Oregon, Washington showed virtually no overall improvement in its food stamp participation rate until at least 2005. It should be noted that in 2004, Washington finally passed an anti-hunger law designed to increase access to federal nutrition programs (Senate Bill 6411). In spite of this delay, Washington’s hunger rate did steadily decline toward the national average, demonstrating that influences other than just food stamp enrollment can reduce a state’s hunger rate. California also showed modest improvements in levels of food insecurity and very low food security, while also reporting slow but obvious developments in collaboration between advocates and agencies. Population diversity and size, plus unique state programs that supplement or replace federal food stamp programs complicate the California food security picture. However, agencies and advocates report a growing level of coordination of services, including contracting with the California Foodbank to organize food stamp outreach.

Finally, Alaska showed a steadily deteriorating situation for households vulnerable to food insecurity, accompanied by a declining food stamp participation rate. Interviews with respondents in Alaska reveal low levels of collaboration between agencies and advocates.

Four cases are insufficient to establish a pattern. However, as SNAP (food stamp) use is demonstrated to reduce food insecurity (Nord and Golla 2009), and collaboration appears to affect food stamp enrollment, there is good reason to anticipate that a study of more cases would indicate a positive relationship between close public–private collaboration and a reduction in state hunger rates.

Conclusion

The interviews with members of both sets of organizations reveal unexpected ways that state agencies have increasingly relied upon nonprofits to improve their performance. The tumultuous process of devolving responsibility to the states provided new opportunities for nonprofits to improve agency delivery of services. In part, agencies were motivated by the incentive structure put in place by welfare reform and by the difficulty of rapidly implementing policies that had new rules and possibilities for flexibility. With their considerable expertise, nonprofit anti-hunger advocates entered into a symbiotic relationship with government agencies focused on services to poor households. The degree to which this happened varied across states.

Studying the fight against food insecurity illustrates the value of the concept of collaborative governance, and the need to explore other intimate collaborations between the private and public sector. This collaboration is more than one group rowing and one group steering, and more than conferring over decisions. When private nonprofit groups are walking the halls of state and county agency offices, encouraging workers, challenging them to think creatively, and helping them meet their performance goals, collaborative governance has taken on an unexpectedly intimate form. Whether or not there is something unique to the fight against food insecurity which made this form of collaborative governance possible is not clear. It is possible, for example, that the unique conditions of crisis and confusion that emerged in the wake of welfare reform launched this kind of intimate collaboration, and may be less evident in other policy sectors where the problems being addressed seem to all or some stakeholders to be less urgent or emotionally evocative than keeping families fed.

Because this study focuses on only a few states, the extent and type of nonprofit–agency interaction that exist in other regions of the country remain to be seen. Further examination of these processes in areas with historically low rates of food insecurity (the upper Midwest, for example) could demonstrate if the observations from these western states are indicative of larger processes throughout the country.

However, there is good reason to anticipate continuation of, and more growth in, collaboration between agencies and advocates when fighting food insecurity. There is little reason to expect a reversal of the now deeply institutionalized administrative philosophy in federal and state government which expects participation of private nonprofit groups in addressing big social problems. Whether or not other states are enthusiastic about such collaboration, the incentives remain in place to encourage them to improve their services to low-income households. The lessons learned by collaborating groups in western states, such as those that participated in this study, are recounted at national and regional gatherings, and serve as positive and negative examples for other state agencies and anti-hunger nonprofit groups. The contemporary rise in food insecurity in the United States further increases pressure on both sets of organizations to collaborate in addressing the crisis.

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