



CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

Filling the Gap: Regional Anti-Hunger Advocacy in America

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Across America there are small, savvy, scrappy and under-funded organizations seeking to insure that hunger is not a forgotten issue in state houses and governors' mansions in almost all 50 capitals. These groups exist because, as a country, we have not put together the resources and the will to end hunger. In fact, some of us do not even admit hunger exists in America. Without these groups adding their voices to the voices of emergency food providers, national anti-hunger organizations, faith-based groups and others, the persistent message that all is not right if even one person is hungry in our wealthy nation will not continue to resonate in the media, in public dialogue and in public policy.

These groups operate in vastly different settings and with vastly different challenges. Some focus only on public policy responses to hunger, others are part of emergency food distribution organizations or state associations of food banks, and others operate as part of multi-focus policy organizations. In almost all cases, they operate alone in their states as policy leaders. They receive information, encouragement, tools, and marching orders from national organizations depending upon them to organize support in local communities, spotlight local issues and faces, and give them feedback on what works and what doesn't.

These state-level anti-hunger groups do pretty well. They portray hunger in the media effectively as a community issue, spark state legislation, issue reports, recruit grassroots members, build local leaders, engage volunteers, build alert networks, influence administrative decisions and deliver positive change for hungry families.

But they lack peer support, access to the great ideas that similar organizations in nearby states hatch and develop, common ground to grapple with key issues, and a way to move their ideas to national policy makers and advocates with an increased sense of urgency around what hungry families face across state borders.

In the west, this is where **WRAHC – Western Region Anti-Hunger Consortium** – has added value to both national and state efforts by building a strong and effective regional community of advocates. A sister organization in the Northeast, **NERAHN or Northeast**

Regional Anti-Hunger Network, has created its own form of regional networking that produces the same outcomes for its members.

This paper outlines why regional groups are important, and why this is a critical time to build regional capacity across America to strengthen efforts to address hunger.

Why Regional Organizing Is Important

States have assumed a greater and greater role in determining how public food and nutrition programs reach needy families. These programs developed in the 1960s and 1970s as national responses to needs observed all over the U.S. but not addressed by local and state government, or the voluntary sector. In some cases, federal programs were put into place to side-step local government and reach all families in need; in this way, the movement corresponded with the civil rights movement.

However, in the 1980s the national response stalled. Funding cuts in key programs including food stamps and child nutrition shifted the burden of addressing hunger back to the states and local communities. The broad network of emergency food programs we now see across America began to develop. In Washington State, this network began as a response to major Boeing Corporation lay-offs in the late 1970s, and continued as the need persisted.

By the early 1990s, state-level advocacy had taken on important roles in four areas:

- Keeping the issue of hunger before the public and policy makers through effective public education campaigns;
- Insuring that federal anti-hunger programs were operated at the state level in ways that reach the most families and take best advantage of federal support;
- Pushing state government to fill gaps and leverage federal funding with strategic use of state funding and state policy

- Linking emergency food efforts with public policy initiatives to build a strong safety net.

Over the past decade, the state-level roles described above have taken on increased importance. The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996, “welfare reform,” not only shifted decision making on key safety net program to the states, but made cuts to programs like food stamps and summer meals for kids. Again, state policy makers were critical to building new systems and filling gaps made by federal cuts. The 2002 Farm Bill added \$6.4 billion in new funding for the food stamp program over ten years, but deferred implementation of many positive reforms to the states as state options. New opportunities to build child nutrition programs for children in out of school time also depend on state administrative support.

For all these reasons, state-level anti-hunger organizing and advocacy has gained in importance. Unfortunately, not all states have organizations with the capacity to fill the four roles outlined above. It was this realization that led to the formation of the Western Region Anti-Hunger Consortium in 1992, and the development of other regional groups including the only other network besides WRAHC that is still operating, the Northeast Regional Anti-Hunger Network or NERAHN.

Background of Regional Networks

The formation of WRAHC came from discussions between the **Children’s Alliance** in Washington State and **California Food Policy Advocates**. These two organizations were leaders among the western states in anti-hunger advocacy. While CFPA grew from the community action and federal Community Food and Nutrition Program funding of the 1970s, the Children’s Alliance food policy work was the result of a Governor’s Task Force on Hunger report in 1988. Both groups had strong records in public education, bipartisan legislative advocacy and nutrition program outreach and promotion. Each had the ability to analyze state-level policies and apply aggressive administrative advocacy to insure that state decisions did not put hungry families further at risk.

Both were also convinced that decision-making on anti-hunger issues was going to continue to shift to the state level, and that building strong state-level advocacy efforts would be key to accomplishing state goals *and* influencing national anti-hunger policy. Looking around the western states, they saw both strong organizations and gaps in the important network of state organizations focusing on public policy and hunger.

An initial meeting with representatives of the eight states that make up USDA’s western region occurred at a FRAC conference in Washington, D.C. Attendees discussed the benefits of having a regional forum to share ideas and challenges, “borrow” materials and strategies from each other, and discuss and communicate to national advocates issues of concern in the west. Common issues facing western advocates included large geographic areas, failing resource-based industries (timber, fisheries), large migrant farmworker populations, cultural and language diversity, and a feeling of isolation from national policy debates.

With the help of initial funders, **Kraft Foods** and **MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger**, WRAHC organized regional meetings to bring together members at locations in the west. One of two meetings per year was held in the Bay Area so that members could meet with staff of the USDA Western Regional Office in San Francisco. Coordination functions moved between the Children’s Alliance and CFPA. National organizations including **FRAC** and the **Center on Budget and Policy Priorities** added their expertise to regional meetings and discussion.

Other regions followed the WRAHC example, obtaining funds from the same sources and developing regional organizations. The Mid-West had a very active network for several years, sponsoring large regional conferences and bringing national experts to share ideas and thoughts. The Southeast also met together for a time. But the only other regional group still operating today is NERAHN, coordinated by **Project Bread** in Boston.

Benefits and Impacts of Regional Organizing 1992 - 2004

WRAHC and NERAHN offer two clear examples of how regional networks can operate in very different environments. For basic information on each group, see the boxes on the next page.

Outcomes of regional networking

Forging Positive Relationships with USDA Regional Offices:

- NERAHN has developed a very strong and unique relationship with the USDA in the Northeast Region. USDA officials turn to NERAHN for information, feedback and innovative ideas for reducing hunger. NERAHN has in turn advocated for changes in food stamp office practices and child nutrition programs.

- As a result, in New York, the Nutrition Consortium has developed a Food Stamp Workgroup that includes USDA.
- In Massachusetts, Project Bread organized a task force of state agencies, chaired by the USDA Regional Administrator, to increase enrollment in federal nutrition programs by matching client data among nutrition programs.

Northeast Regional Anti-Hunger Network

Founded in 1996

Fiscal agent: Project Bread, Boston, MA

Member states: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York

Total number of member organizations: 14, plus the Food Research and Action Center

Meetings: Every other month for a one-day meeting

Budget: \$12,000

Crossing Organizational Lines to Bring Together Divergent Groups to Focus on Common Problems

- WRAHC determined that state food stamp directors could be key allies in achieving positive changes in the 2002 Farm Bill Food Stamp Reauthorization debate and moved proactively to develop a joint, common-issues agenda.
- Two meetings were held with Western States' directors to determine priority issues. At the second meeting, a representative from the national association, American Public Human Services Association, attended;
- The meetings were a step in the momentum that led to a national alliance of FRAC, APhSA and America's Second Harvest, and a joint announcement of Farm Bill priorities.
- By taking a bold step, WRAHC helped the national anti-hunger community achieve concrete victories in the 2002 Farm Bill, including restoration of food stamps to many legal immigrants, a Western States' priority.

Working Together to Insure Policy Makers Understand Regional Issues

- NERAHN members drafted a statement of guiding principles for policymakers to consider as they

reviewed the Child Nutrition Act in 2003. These principles were designed to focus on the on-the-ground issues facing schools and others as they worked to provide nutritious meals to young children.

- NERAHN members recruited 2,200 endorsements of the principles from individuals and organizations in the Northeast.
- The principles and endorsements were delivered to the Northeast's Congressional Delegation at an issue briefing in November 2003.
- Members of Congress from the Northeast, including Patrick Leahy of Vermont, are key in this year's debate on child nutrition reauthorization.

Western Region Anti-Hunger Consortium

Founded in 1992

Fiscal agent: Children's Alliance, Seattle, WA

Member states: California, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, Washington, Hawaii, Montana, Alaska

Total number of member organizations: 20, with involvement of FRAC, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Bread for the World and other national organizations

Meetings: Twice per year for 2 days; short meetings at FRAC conferences; conference calls

Budget: \$53,000

Developing New Leaders of the Anti-Hunger Movement

- When WRAHC first organized, there were three strong statewide organizations leading the way in the West: the Children's Alliance, CFPA and the Arizona Association of Food Banks. Over the course of the past decade, WRACH has work to build new leaders by:
 - Conducting training, sharing materials, work shopping ideas and providing technical assistance;
 - Designing bi-annual meetings with the input of members to insure that topics were relevant and engaging all members as presenters on key topics.
- As a result, a group of emerging leaders has developed:

- Food Bank of North Nevada: Cherie Jamason - cutting edge work to expand after-school snacks and summer meals statewide;
- Northern California Food Banks: Kim Wade - pioneering strategies to bring local food banks into public policy education and advocacy in very effective ways;
- Oregon Food Bank: Kim Thomas - a national model for integrating advocacy into all aspects of their food bank network, and in engaging low-income families in speaking up.

Member Feedback on Regional Groups: WRAHC and NERAHN

Members of regional groups have many reasons for their enthusiastic participation. In their own words:

"WRAHC provides easily comprehensible analysis and advice on legislation and advocacy, and enables me to form personal connections and contacts with anti-hunger colleagues. Thanks to information and education through WRAHC we were able to work with the Department of Education to establish a summer food program in the Anchorage School District and then, last year, to expand it to four sites." *Food Bank of Alaska*

"NERAHN was instrumental in helping the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger get involved in Food Stamp Outreach. From doing no work on the issues prior to 2000, we now have two full time staff engaged in this activity." *Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger*

"WRAHC provides great ideas for outreach and simplifying programs to take home and try. It's a great way to train new staff, and WRAHC has been helpful in getting USDA to move on administrative issues that affect hungry families." *Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force*

"NERAHN is valuable to me, the Worcester County Food Bank and hungry people in Massachusetts because of its advocacy work at state, regional and federal levels. It's a great way to stay informed about what's going on at all levels and to get involved with planning strategies for taking action on issues that have positive impact on people's ability to meet their food and nutritional needs. It's a wonderful platform for collective voice and collective action. I always come away with doable action steps and tangible ideas from each NERAHN meeting." *Worcester County Food Bank*

"Regional networks continue to be the missing piece in our national and state level work to end hunger - with WRAHC and NERAHN the happy exception! Would

that there were networks in each region AND a national network of regional heads. Again, the training, information sharing and policy discussions thrive in these smaller, connected leadership circles." *California Association of Food Banks*

Essential Elements in Successful Regional Anti-Hunger Networks

For the last decade WRAHC and NERAHN have succeeded in bringing state advocates together for mutual benefit of hungry families in 17 states. Yet other regional groups have failed. What are the essential elements needed for successful regional organizing?

1. Member organizations must feel that regional groups add value to their work so that they prioritize participation in meetings, sharing of information, and working together.
2. Lead organization must make available sufficient staff time to insure that basic needs of the network are met: meeting scheduling, travel assistance, conference calls, website maintenance, information exchange, agenda building, communications, etc.
3. Funding must be sufficient so that member organizations are not overly burdened by participating. For example, a recent survey of WRAHC members revealed that most could subsidize meetings by around \$100 per person, but could not bear dues of \$500 per year.
4. Linkages with national groups are essential in insuring that regional groups have good information and the ability to communicate their issues to national advocates.
5. Networks must be committed to building leadership in their regions by engaging all member organizations and participants, providing trainings as needed, and encouraging members to be available to other members for idea exchange and support.
6. Meeting schedules, duration and location should be flexible enough to meet the needs of members, i.e., bi-monthly meetings make sense in the northeast states, bi-yearly meetings make sense in the West.
7. Network agendas should be realistic and focused on providing the "missing link," not re-inventing national conferences or state-level issue-specific work.

Moving to the Next Level: the WRAHC experience

In 2001, WRAHC received a major grant from the **David and Lucile Packard Foundation** to take regional anti-hunger organizing to a new level. The purpose of the grant was to increase regional public education and advocacy in the period 2001-2003 as Congress focused on reauthorizing the Food Stamp Program through the Farm Bill, and child nutrition programs through the Child Nutrition Act. Packard made similar grants to national organizations, including FRAC, America's Second Harvest and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and to California state groups.

Packard funding allowed WRAHC to increase staff time available through the Children's Alliance, to contract with Public Media Center to design and print materials and to build a WRAHC website, and to continue to transfer work done by CFPA to regional partners. Among the activities of this project were visits by staff to most of the WRAHC states to provide briefings, meet with Congressional staff, and support member activities. Packets and materials were designed for Congressional visits. News stories illustrating hunger in the west were commissioned. A website was built, and other tools were developed.

WRAHC had a definite impact on the Farm Bill debate. And we learned much more about effective communication of issues facing hungry families and about solutions to the hunger problem. WRAHC developed an advanced system of providing "cut to the chase" alerts to member organizations and individuals who have joined our Action Alert Network. Messages start with national information and alerts and are tailored to Western audiences, often cutting through detailed explanations to summarize key actions. WRAHC members turn these around to their networks quickly, knowing that regional staff had already done the analysis.

A Case Study

WRAHC is currently working on child nutrition reauthorization, delayed by Congress to 2004. Last year, WRAHC led a particularly effective effort to clearly outline the impacts of USDA proposals to increase paperwork in the National School Lunch Program. USDA research had led some to conclude that more children were receiving subsidized school meals than should be. Indications were that this could lead to changes in how children apply for school meals, changes that could lead to many eligible and needy children not receiving the help they need.

In 2002, WRAHC members reviewed the USDA research and developed plans for a response:

1. **Research.**
WRAHC asked the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities to analyze the USDA research and determine if the conclusions being drawn were valid.
 - The Center wrote a series of reports, pointing out the flaws in the research and reviewing information on potential impacts
 - When the results of new USDA pilot studies on increasing verification of school lunch applications were released last summer, the Center issued a follow-up stating that the new pilots made it harder for needy children to receive school meals.
2. **Media.**
WRAHC developed a mini-communications plan to reach key newspapers in the Western States. In the winter of 2003, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Sacramento Bee, and San Francisco Chronicle published articles, editorials and columns on the issue and illuminated the fears of local school staff that increased paperwork would drive needy families away from the program.
3. **Policy maker education.**
WRAHC members outlined the problem to Congressional staff at meetings in the winter of 2003. As a result, Washington Senators Cantwell and Murray wrote a letter to the Senate Agriculture Committee expressing their concern about potential changes in school meal eligibility.

Outcome

Last winter, members of Congress were discussing increasing the percentage of school lunch applications that must be verified by local school districts from 3% to 12%. This four-fold increase would not only make school lunch harder for hungry families to reach, but would also considerably increase workload for local administrators. After release of USDA's pilot study data, the push for increased verification eased off. Although we expect this year's discussion may still call for increased verification, it is unlikely to exceed 6%, half of last year's target.

What does this mean? It means that in this case relaying information to the public and policy makers about the unintended consequences of increased verification on poor children resulted in a change of opinion, a change that will benefit these children and insure the continued safety net of the National School Lunch Program. WRAHC cannot take sole credit for this opinion change. Many were involved. However, we feel that our strategies, and our effort to keep this issue at the

front of advocacy efforts in child nutrition reauthorization, had a positive impact.

WRAHC's achievements under the Packard grant, now in its final six months, have led WRAHC members to conclude that added staffing, guided by a mutually-developed work plan, lends much added value to state-level efforts to influence national policy.

Next Steps in Building Regional Anti-Hunger Organizations

Advocates outside the northeast and western states are interested in developing regional networks that mirror the priorities and outcomes of NERAHN and WRAHC. Primary stumbling blocks include shortages of:

1. Resources for basic operations
2. Help in determining start-up goals and reasonable expectations
3. Supportive relationships with national organizations
4. A forum in which to share regional issues and ideas with other regional groups
5. A way to evaluate the effectiveness of regional efforts

A five-year plan for filling the regional organizing gap and increasing the effectiveness of state-level anti-hunger advocacy could include:

1. Phased-in funding to build regional groups in other regions, including the Mid-Atlantic, South East, Midwest, Mountain Plains
 - a. Start-up grants of \$25,000 each for new regional groups
 - b. Start by adding two new regions, add one to two each year
2. Technical assistance to developing regions
 - a. From WRAHC or NERAHN: reasonable goals, creating an atmosphere of mutual support, evaluation
 - b. From national organizations: protocols for working together
3. Development of a regional forum
 - a. Development of priorities
 - b. Development of relationships with national groups
4. Continued support for exploring a stronger regional voice
 - a. Stabilization funding for WRAHC to continue to explore how added staff-time for regional coordination can add value to national and state-level efforts
 - b. Stabilization funding for NERAHN to strengthen its efforts in the NE

5. Year-to-year outcomes for all phases of the project to determine how effective the regional strategy has been in addressing hunger in America.

Potential outcomes on Investment in Regional Anti-Hunger Efforts:

Ultimately, the desired outcome is to reduce hunger in America through increased support for public and private strategies, measured through a reduction in household food insecurity. Additional outcomes include:

1. Stronger and more organized support for national public education and advocacy efforts.
2. Development of organizations and leadership in states that currently do not have strong voices for hungry families.
3. Models for state-level efforts that combine food distribution and advocacy, including how to engage food bank volunteers.
4. Better utilization of and access to state-level leaders in building a national anti-hunger movement.
5. More effective outreach and promotion efforts for nutrition programs due to sharing of great ideas, materials, etc.
6. Faster transfer of great ideas from state to state and region to region.

Filling the regional anti-hunger advocacy gap could have an enormous impact on reducing hunger in America through leadership development, sharing and collaborative efforts. There are excellent models in place, interest and enthusiasm from advocates in most other regions of the U.S., and much to be gained by working smarter and more strategically to make fighting hunger a national priority.

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