

Note from the CEO

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When I first stepped into the world of food banking, I inherited a system that operated based on providing any food available to those in need without much consideration for its nutritional value. Over time, I've come to realize the critical importance of shifting our focus toward providing nutritious options rather than just any food. Sure, not everything accessed through our programs and services is nutritious (everyone deserves treats), but when we have a choice, we are always going to choose the healthier item.

Our mission has always been to alleviate hunger in our community, but as we've delved deeper, we've recognized hunger is only part of the problem. The lack of access to nutritious foods is a significant issue that directly impacts the health and well-being of those we serve. It became evident that simply filling empty stomachs with any available food wasn't enough; we needed to ensure the food we provided was nourishing and conducive to long-term health.

As luck would have it, just before I started as CEO at the Food Bank for Larimer County, the organization had applied for—and received—a grant from Kraft. At the time, this particular grant was quite progressive because food banks across the country still distributed mainly shelf-stable products. Kraft wanted to help distribute more fresh produce. While we were ecstatic to be leading the way in this transition toward offering fresh produce, we were quickly faced with a frustrating gap in our logistical systems and processes.

We learned quickly that we had not adequately set up our partner agencies to distribute these types of products. Because we knew there was a distinct link between food insecurity and malnutrition, we also knew making this shift in distribution was essential, no matter how much work it would be. We quickly created a highly structured system to distribute more produce ... our very small on-site pantry known as "TEFAP" became the "Fresh Food Share." We wanted the name of the shopping location to make it clear we were ACTIVELY sourcing products that were fresh and part of a nutritious diet. Implementing this change with our partner agencies wasn't without its challenges. We had to overhaul our distribution infrastructure, invest in proper storage and transportation facilities for perishable items, and educate both our volunteers and the community about the importance of nutrition.

Today, over 40% of the food we distribute each year is produce. We weren't only innovative then; we continue to be. The percentage of fresh produce we distribute is just one area in which the Food Bank for Larimer County leads the Feeding America Network. We feel proud to have paved the way. Today, this concept may not seem overwhelmingly innovative; lots of other food banks operate with this structure. But it was quite the transition 20 years ago. Thinking back on this paradigm and operational shift brings a smile to my face. Fresh food is something people facing food insecurity deserve and need.

We were also one of the first food banks to hire registered dietitians as staff members. To meet our goals and vision, we need experts on our team to guide and consult on programs. We've been able to use our nutrition-education staff expertise externally, too: we not only ensure we give fresh, nutritious food directly to clients but also to our 120+ community-wide agency partners who help us meet our vision of a hunger-free Larimer County.

To manage the acquisition and distribution of fresh food, we needed to create a highly operationalized system that allowed us to get food through an entire life cycle (from acquisition to distribution) in about one day. To make this happen, we created a concept that allowed for direct retail store pick up – a practice that ensures we get a LOT of fresh produce and, more importantly, get that produce into clients' hands that same day, when it is still in quality form.

By prioritizing nutritious food, we've been able to address both food insecurity and health outcomes. Our focus is no longer on providing any food but on food that contributes to health. Over the years, we've continued to incorporate these concepts into new programs. Some of the ones about which I feel most fondly—and directly have to do with nutrition and nutrition education are:

- The **Tasting Table** allowed clients to learn and be exposed to new and sometimes unfamiliar items so they're more likely to take them and use those products.
- Our **Veg Out** program allows us to work with local farmers to purchase fresh produce during the growing season. Whenever they have too much to sell, we buy it from them and distribute it from our Fresh Food Share no-cost markets.
- **Plant it Forward** is a partnership we hold dearly with the Gardens on Spring Creek with a shared goal to increase local produce donations from backyard gardeners. Community members are invited to plant an extra row in their gardens and when the crops are ready, they can drop them off at either the Food Bank for Larimer County or the Gardens on Spring Creek. No donation is too small!
- **Nutritious Kitchen** prepares meals for children and seniors almost entirely from scratch!

Together, with the support of our community, partners, and dedicated team, we will continue to nourish not just empty stomachs but the bodies and minds of all those we serve. True food security isn't just about having enough to eat—it's about having access to the nourishment needed to thrive.