



RIVER BEND
FOOD BANK

MEMBER OF
FEEDING
AMERICA

Introductory Guide to Anti-Hunger Advocacy





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INTRODUCTION



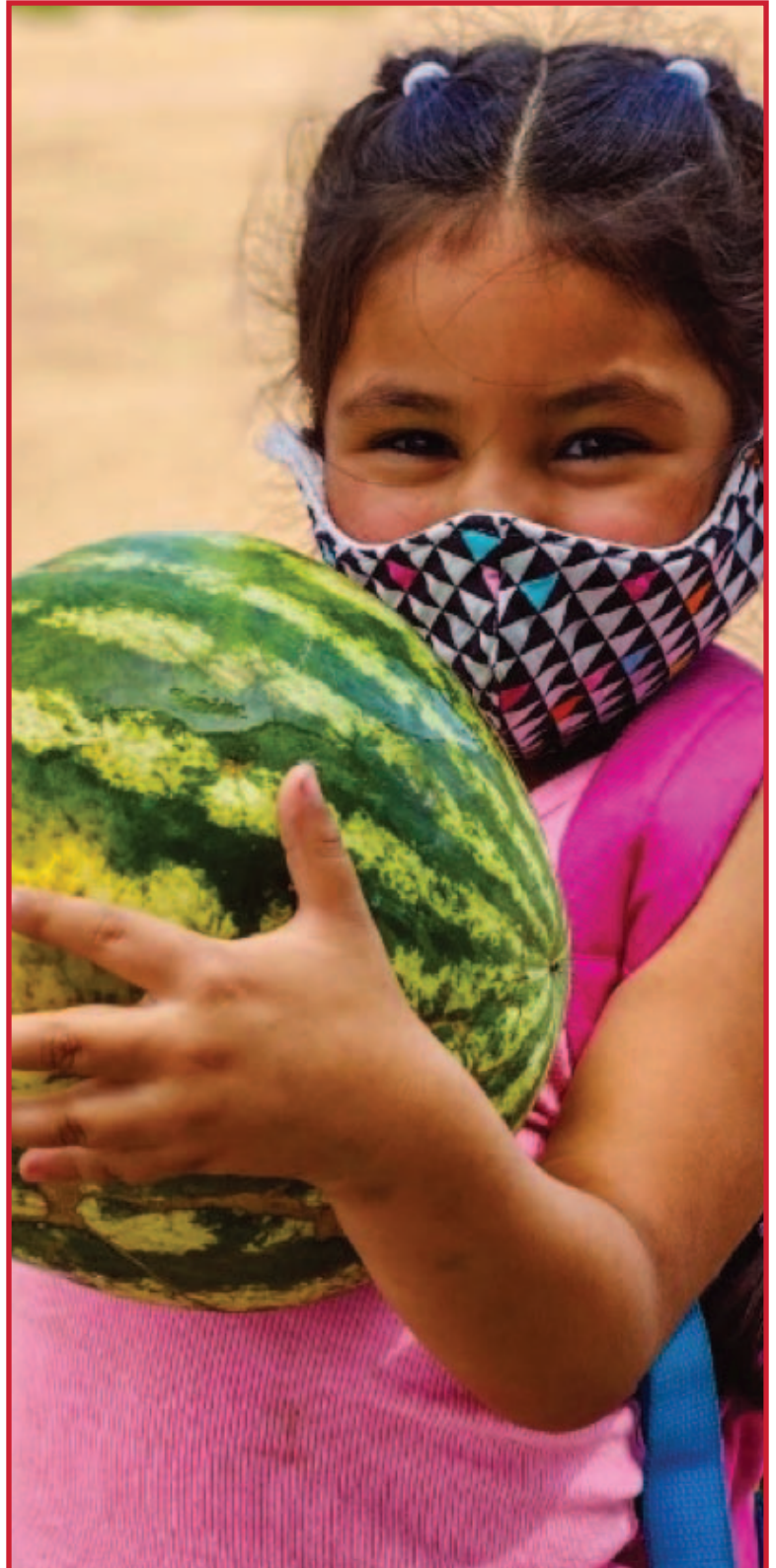
People experiencing hunger don't have lobbyists.

Fighting to end hunger is no small undertaking. Food banks and food pantries – including their donors and volunteers – all work together to help put food on the table for those experiencing hunger. Unfortunately, as COVID has shown us, too many of us are just one economic shock away from needing assistance ourselves.

River Bend Food Bank's (RBFb) mission is to lead efforts to end hunger in the 23 counties we serve but providing food assistance is only one part of the answer. We need to work with decision makers at both the local and national levels to ensure our public policies complement our efforts to fight hunger. As a result, RBFb is becoming more strategic about our advocacy efforts. But success will only come by including our supporters in advocacy efforts as well.

As a result, RBFb created this guide to:

- **Provide the board and staff with a common understanding of how the organization will champion anti-hunger issues.**
- **Guide partner agencies that want to increase their advocacy strategies.**
- **Serve as a resource for other interested stakeholders (e.g., donors, volunteers, other stakeholders) in their anti-hunger efforts.**





RIVER BEND FOOD BANK'S APPROACH TO ADVOCACY



River Bend Food Bank leads the community-wide effort to end hunger in eastern Iowa and western Illinois.

Our mission is to:

- **L**everage partnerships to help people in need stabilize their lives.
- **E**ngage the public in hunger issues.
- **A**dvocate on behalf of hungry people.
- **D**istribute surplus food through a network of hunger-relief agency partners and programs.
- **S**triving to end hunger.



Two fundamental principles drive our public policy advocacy efforts. First, we will always champion issues that are directly related to fighting hunger. Second, we are committed to making sure that our education and advocacy messages are nonpartisan. Nonpartisanship is not only a requirement for nonprofits, but our vision for a hunger-free Iowa and Illinois is too important to be perceived as partisan, either nationally or locally. As a result, not only are we nonpartisan, but we ask that others not use us in a partisan manner.

Anti-Hunger Issues

RBFB does not employ a team dedicated to policy research and advocacy. Instead, it relies on the policy recommendations of partner organizations such as Feeding America, Feeding Illinois, the Iowa Food Bank Association, and the Greater Chicago Food Depository to identify priority anti-hunger issues and develop policy recommendations at the national and state levels.

Issues that will always be on RBFB's radar include:

- Including healthy, fresh, locally sourced, and culturally appropriate options in food provided by USDA programs.
- Making anti-hunger programs (federal, state, and local) easier to access (for example, by removing the requirement for congregate feeding sites and using updated technology for signatures and approvals).
- Strengthening anti-hunger provisions in existing legislation including the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Bill, the Farm Bill (renewed every five years, always with a new official name) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

As additional policy issues arise, RFBF will consider each individually. While the organizations we rely on for policy recommendations may advocate for other anti-poverty issues (e.g., affordable housing, minimum wage), RFBF's mandate is to focus on issues directly related to food, hunger, and our current (or potential) programs.



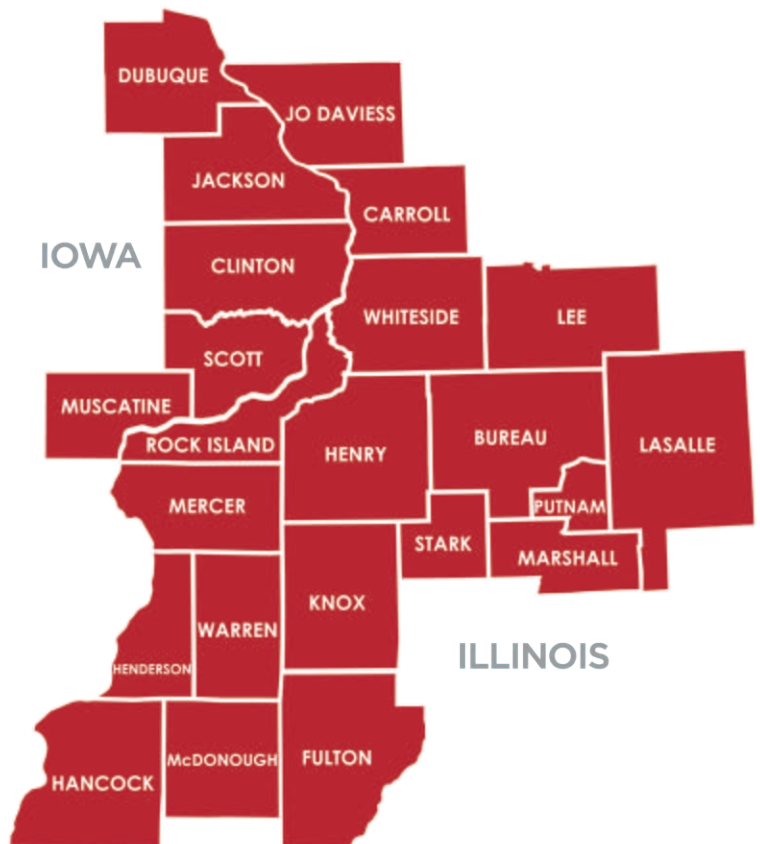
For RFBF staff:

Without a dedicated policy research and advocacy team, the CEO works with an informal team of staff members on advocacy initiatives. This group monitors and communicates with the partners in the Feeding America National Organization (FANO) network to track policy issues, decide when to mobilize partner agencies and supporters, and develop communications. If you would like to be part of this informal team, express your interest to your supervisor and/or the CEO.

Partnerships / Coalitions

RFBF is a Feeding America (FANO) partner and also partners with 340+ agencies across 23 counties in Illinois and Iowa. There is always strength in numbers, but in advocacy, it's critical to success. Some ways the RFBF leverage partnerships to help people in need stabilize their lives through advocacy include:

- Participating in national and state calls on anti-hunger advocacy initiatives,
- Coordinating advocacy initiatives with other FANO partners in Illinois and Iowa – both in terms of strategy, messaging, and contacting officials, and
- Sharing information and resources with partner agencies about current advocacy efforts.



🍏 — EDUCATION V. ADVOCACY V. LOBBYING — 🍏

Education, advocacy, and lobbying are critical tools nonprofits can use to advance their mission. Unfortunately, the rules that guide 501(c)3s are vague. To understand what is – and is not – allowed, it’s essential to understand the difference between educational, advocacy, and lobbying activities.

Unallowable Activities



The easiest place to start is by looking at what is clearly not allowed. According to the IRS, nonprofits with 501(c)3 status are:

“...are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, [or donating to], any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office.”

Sometimes, nonprofits interpret this to mean they shouldn’t be involved in anything related to policy or politics, but by doing so, they are limiting their ability to accomplish their mission.

Nonpartisan Activities



According to the IRS, nonprofits can conduct nonpartisan activities, such as educating the public on issues, publishing voter education guides, conducting voter registration activities, or encouraging people to participate in the political process (such as voting or contacting elected officials). The keyword here is nonpartisan. If the activities are perceived as promoting (or opposing) one side, they are not allowed. For example, a voter education guide must include all the candidates and accurately reflect their positions on a particular issue and may not recommend how supporters cast their vote.

Educational Activities



A vital part of RBFB’s mission is to “engage the public on hunger issues.” Engaging the public is not limited to attracting volunteers and donors but includes educating the public about what we do, who we help, how government programs are funded, and how much more assistance is necessary. Public education on anti-hunger issues can take many forms, including newsletters, social media, public forums, a letter to the editor, or a press conference.

Advocacy

Education aimed at government officials (either elected leaders or civil servants) is advocacy. This includes any level of government, from a local mayor to the White House. Examples of advocacy include:

- Informing a Senator about how a **current** federal program helps (or harms) stakeholders.
- Suggesting improvements to current government programs so they could be more efficient. Suggestions for improving proposed legislation is lobbying (which we will discuss in the next section).
- Inviting a state representative to visit program sites and meet with staff, board, volunteers, or stakeholders and listen to their stories.
- Sharing historical information about how public policies have affected stakeholders.

Advocacy activities are allowed, if, like educational activities, they are nonpartisan.



Lobbying

Advocacy becomes lobbying when it is about specific, proposed legislation before it becomes law. This is the grayest area for nonprofits to interpret. According to the IRS:

*“...no organization may qualify for section 501(c)(3) status if a substantial part of its activities is attempting to influence legislation (commonly known as lobbying).
A 501(c)(3) organization may engage in some lobbying,
but too much lobbying activity risks loss of tax-exempt status.”*

Lobbying includes both:

- **Direct lobbying** – contacting officials and asking them to support (or oppose) legislation, and
- **Grassroots lobbying** – nonprofits encouraging supporters to contact officials and ask them to support (or oppose) legislation.

Unfortunately, “substantial part of its activities” and “some lobbying” are not clearly defined.



Feeding America (FANO) Advocacy and Lobbying Target Audiences

Because RBFB conducts many of its advocacy activities as part of FANO, we use their target group categories. The following chart provides an overview of the target groups and potential activities associated with each category.

FANO TARGET CATEGORY	EDUCATE	ADVOCATE	LOBBY
Federal officials <i>(elected officials and agencies)</i>	X	X	X
State or local officials	X	X	X
Grassroots <i>(such as advocates, volunteers, agencies, etc.)</i>	X	X*	X*
Grasstops <i>(influential community members)</i>	X	X*	X*
Media	X		
Coalitions <i>(agriculture, education, health, business, institutions, etc.)</i>	X	X	
*grassroots advocacy and lobbying			

What to Expect from RBFB

The majority of activities RBFB will focus on asking supporters to engage in educational activities – sharing specific information about our activities or general information about how hunger affects lowans and Illinoisans.

Occasionally, we will ask you to engage in citizen advocacy – contacting a state or elected official to share why policies that work to fight hunger in our community are so important.

RBFB will rarely ask supporters to lobby on specific legislation – and if we do, it will be around omnibus legislation such as the Farm Bill or the Child Nutrition Bill.

Information for Partner Agencies

Your nonprofit (in consultation with its board, lawyers, and accountants) will need to decide on your approach to advocacy and lobbying. Be sure that you understand your state lobbying rules as your organization makes these critical decisions. Some options include:

- Never mentioning specific, proposed legislation and only engaging in advocacy activities.
- Limiting mentions of specific, proposed legislation in communications with the public and elected officials so that it could never be interpreted as a “substantial part of its activities”
- Taking the 501(h) election and documenting lobby activity with the expenditure and/or substantial part tests.

- Incorporating a 501(c)4 – which allows lobbying – to work in coordination with the 501(c)3. Examples of this approach include nonpartisan political organizations such as the League of Women Voters and ONE.org.
- Deciding not to participate in advocacy as an organization but allowing staff to act as individual citizens and volunteer for other organizations’ anti-hunger advocacy initiatives. If you go this route, be sure to review Election Activities of Individuals Associated with 501(c)(3) Organizations and put policies in place for staff so that the lines are clearly drawn.

Additional Resources

IRS.gov has a series of 10 webinars in their online Small to Mid-Size Tax Exempt Organization Workshop.

Illinois

- (25 ILCS 170/) Lobbyist Registration Act
- IL Secretary of State’s Lobbyist Activities Index

Iowa

- Iowa Code Chapter 68B Government Ethics and Lobbying
- IA Legislature’s Lobbyist Legal Information



Some municipalities have regulations on lobbyists as well, so be sure to check.

The National Council of Nonprofits dedicates a section of its website to Advocacy in Action to demonstrate how common nonprofit advocacy is – and how effective it can be in advancing missions, improving lives, and strengthening communities. There is also a free newsletter *Nonprofit Advocacy Matters*.”

The Advocacy Toolkit on the **Council on Foundations** website is designed to be a central resource for those in the philanthropic space to learn about **why** it is important for philanthropy to have a voice in policy, **how** to effectively use advocacy and lobbying to advance your mission, **what** the most critical or priority “asks” are for the sector at any given time, and to better understand the key **policy issues** that are top-of-mind for foundations and nonprofits.

Bolder Advocacy equips nonprofits with the knowledge they need to be confident and powerful advocates. Invaluable resources include Tools for Effective Advocacy, State Law Resources, and 501(c)(3) Employees Running for Office.

“Yes, You Can—and Should! Nonprofit Advocacy as a Core Competency” in the **Nonprofit Quarterly**. First published online on November 17, 2017.



MESSAGING



How we talk about anti-hunger issues can be as important as the issues themselves. Messaging helps us frame the core points that we want to get across about anti-hunger issues so that our stakeholders will understand and remember them.

Nonprofit advocacy messages should be clear, targeted at a particular audience, and contain three critical elements:

- **Identifying a problem,**
- **Outlining the solution(s), and**
- **Asking the targeted audience to take steps that are necessary to achieve the solution.**

Target audiences can be defined as broadly or narrowly as you need. Educational messages might be drafted for the general public or broken into smaller groups aimed at smaller groups by whether they are rural/urban, religious/secular, conservative/liberal, young/old, and many more.

When you are developing advocacy or lobbying messages, you will want to be sure to keep in mind the FANO target audiences outlined above. Consider these two different messages you can use to speak to Members of Congress about supporting an increase in SNAP benefits.

PROBLEM	<p>SNAP is the nation’s first line of defense against hunger. Unfortunately, SNAP benefits are inadequate to maintain a healthy diet throughout the month: SNAP benefits historically average less than \$1.40 per person per meal, and more than 90 percent of benefits are spent after only three weeks.</p> <p>In addition to meeting an immediate need of those affected by COVID, an increase in SNAP benefits will:</p>	
SOLUTION	<p>Have a positive impact on the economy. Each \$1 in SNAP benefits during a downturn generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in economic activity. These dollars flow through all parts of the economy – from farmers and food manufacturers to truckers, food retailers, and store employees.</p>	<p>Deter future problems caused by benefit inadequacy. Research has linked diminished food budgets later in the month with a drop-off in caloric intake, lower school performance, and increased hospitalizations for low-income adults due to low blood sugar.</p>
ASK	<p>Congress should continue the COVID-increase of SNAP benefits by at least 15 percent until the health crisis has ended and sufficient economic recovery has been realized.</p>	
	<p><i>This message may be more effective with groups concerned with feeding people and improving the economy.</i></p>	<p><i>This message may be more effective with groups concerned with feeding people and improving society’s long-term health / educational issues.</i></p>

What to Expect from RBFB

RBFB focuses advocacy efforts and associated messages around issues (i.e., child nutrition, SNAP) rather than specific legislation (e.g., HB 1xx). There will be times when RBFB develops messages to lobby around legislation, but only if it is focused on fighting food insecurity, such as the Child Nutrition Bill.

RBFB works with FANO partners to develop targeted messaging for a variety of audiences. We will always share these messages with our board, staff, volunteers, and partner agencies to assist in their educational and advocacy efforts.



STORYTELLING



Storytellers have entertained people for centuries. Stories make oral histories easy to remember, explain why things are the way they are, provide origin stories for superheroes and politicians, and inspire audiences.

But what exactly do we mean when we talk about storytelling for nonprofits?

***Storytelling** is a powerful way to connect your audience to your message and inspire action. It is a tool nonprofits can use to solicit donations, inspire volunteers, win grants, promote engagement on social media, and convince policy makers that anti-hunger programs are important and effective.*

Some of us may get a little anxious about the idea of crafting stories. Still, you don't need to be an expert in creative writing or marketing to talk passionately or convincingly about the impact of your nonprofit's work. Stories only need a few common elements to be effective:

- **Be authentic** by channeling your passion for your organization's mission.
- **Evoke emotion** through images or descriptive language, and you want to call on as many senses as you can in telling your stories.
- **Anticipate and answer questions**, including as many of the "wh-" questions as you can, and support with specific results and data. Infographics can be very helpful here.
- **Include a call to action** by telling readers what you want them to do next. Engaged audiences are motivated to take the next step, so use the opportunity to ask them to visit your website, donate, volunteer, contact their representatives, etc.

The importance of storytelling in the digital age cannot be underestimated. You can find many more resources online to guide you, but Donorbox's Ultimate Guide to Nonprofit Storytelling is an excellent place to start.

Dignity in Storytelling

When you're communicating a neighbor's story, make sure to do so with dignity. This means helping your audience see that the people you serve are more than just the issue they're dealing with at that moment in time. Some tips to keep in mind:



DO

- Encourage your neighbors to tell their stories in their own words. They can share in writing or on an audio or video recording. Make sure you get their approval if you make any edits for language or grammar.
- Empower neighbors by using strength-based language. This means using words like “person experiencing hunger” rather than “hungry person” and “person facing homelessness” instead of “homeless person.”
- Get a written release before using someone's name or image in any communication materials.



DON'T

- Confuse telling “their story in their own words” with you writing the script for your neighbors to perform.
- Write about the person as a victim and your organization/donor as the savior.
- Reinforce any harmful stigmas or stereotypes.

Read more about Ethical Storytelling | Communication Without Exploitation from [Idealist.org](https://www.idealists.org).





TACTICS



Messages are the core points you want to get across, stories make messages memorable, and tactics are the activities used to create and deliver the stories.

Everyone who works with RBFB is part of the fight against hunger in eastern Iowa and western Illinois. This includes staff, the board, volunteers, partner agencies, and other stakeholders vital to RBFB’s mission.

Each of these individuals has a different superpower, time, and comfort level to contribute to the fight against hunger. These variables will help determine how

to focus your supporters’ efforts. The following chart outlines some critical differences between tactics. A more detailed description of each tactic follows below.



TACTIC	ASSOCIATED SUPERPOWERS	TIME REQUIRED
Volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion 	Depends on person
Staying Current on Policy Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion 	15+ minutes per week
Championing Anti-Hunger Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion • People / Friends • Press contacts and/or social media savvy 	15+ minutes per week
Writing Letters to the Editor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion • Persuasion • Excellent grammar and proofreading skills 	30+ minutes per letter
Contacting Elected Officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion • Persuasion 	15+ minutes per week
Meeting with your Elected Officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion • Persuasion • Public Speaking 	3-4 hours in prep time, meeting time, and sending thank you notes

Volunteering

Although not usually thought of as an advocacy tactic, being part of the solution is critical to contributing to the community-wide effort to end hunger. **First**, volunteers are vital to RFBF's mission of ensuring that no one in our service area goes hungry. **Second**, volunteering will help you understand the work of RFBF. Even if you cannot commit to a regular volunteer shift, volunteering once will help when you use your voice to fight against hunger. **Finally**, successful advocacy is about telling powerful stories.



Volunteering will help you talk about the food bank's work with more passion. Volunteering also allows RFBF relay the story of the impact of its programs when advocating to elected officials on anti-hunger issues. Being able to demonstrate that constituents are passionate about the cause is very powerful in influencing public servants.

River Bend Food Bank is proud to partner with 300 food pantries, meal sites, schools, and community organizations across our 23-county service area in Illinois and Iowa. Every one of them will appreciate you donating your time to the anti-hunger cause.

Staying Current on Policy Issues

Volunteers sometimes shy away from advocacy because they don't feel they are "experts" on a topic. Public officials don't expect you to have an advanced degree on a topic. They do expect a basic understanding of the issues and never underestimate the power of your passion for anti-hunger issues.

Many organizations will help you stay up-date on what is happening in your state and around the country. In addition to signing up RFBF's advocacy email list - these organizations can help keep you informed as well: Feeding America, Feeding Illinois, the Iowa Food Bank Association, and the Greater Chicago Food Depository , and Northern Illinois Food Bank.

Here are some specific resources that provide up-to-date, accurate information on issues related to hunger and hunger relief efforts.

Check Out these Sites



The entire Feeding America site is a vital source of information. Its Hunger in America, Take Action and Blog pages include specifics on general policy issues, specific actions to take, and stories to share about the fight against hunger in the US. Be sure to check out the Map the Meal Gap where you can learn about food insecurity in your state and county. It's sister site, Feeding America Action also contains valuable information on the issues, policies, and state-by-state resources.

Feeding Illinois and the Iowa Food Bank Association provide contact information about the food banks in each state, and state-specifics on the face of hunger.

The Greater Chicago Food Depository employs a governance relations team that researches hunger issues at both the federal and local level. Its advocacy page also features success stories, opportunities to get involved, and past webinars on different topics.

Last updated January 2022



Championing Anti-Hunger Issues

83 percent of Americans say that word of mouth recommendations from friends and family members make them likelier to purchase a product or service.¹

People are more influenced by recommendations from their friends and family than they are by paid advertisements. This holds true for shopping, voting, and donating to nonprofits.

One of the best ways you can advocate for people experiencing hunger is by making your friends and family know that this is a cause you believe in, so much so that you donate your money, time, and voice to the fight to end hunger. You can share stories about your experiences with RBFB in person, through emails, or on a blog, but in the 21st century, social media tends to be the preferred form. You can do this in a couple of ways:

• **Share Social Media Posts**

Follow **@riverbendfoodbank** on your favorite social media channel and share the ones that make you want to learn more, volunteer, or donate.

- >> For Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, sharing posts is as simple as clicking the “Share” button.
- >> On Instagram, hit the arrow icon below the post, tap “Add post/video/reel to your story” and then tap “Your Story” and hit the arrow button.
Note: Because it’s in “your story” rather than a post, it will disappear in 24 hours.
- >> When you share a post, it’s good practice to add a couple of words (or sentences) about WHY you are sharing the post. This will make them more likely to read it through than if you share without any context.



• **Create Your Own Posts**

These types of posts will show up higher in your friends’ feeds than the ones you share, so if you can spend a couple of minutes creating a post, rather than sharing, your voice will be heard by more people. Here are some tips on what makes a great social media post:

- >> Take a picture of yourself volunteering. If you are in a group, even better.
- >> Pull a key theme or quote from an article you read about the face of hunger in your region and use that quote to introduce the post.
- >> Post signup pages for an upcoming volunteer event or fundraiser and ask your friends and family to join you.
- >> Tag **@riverbendfoodbank** in your post. We will be notified and can share your post in our network.
- >> Use hashtags such as **#endhunger #foodinsecurity #foodbank #community #food #volunteer #donate #hungeractionmonth** (September only) so that a larger group of people will see your post.

¹ from How Your Nonprofit Will Benefit from Word of Mouth Marketing, SCORE

Please remember that as a nonprofit, RBFB is nonpartisan. All the posts we share will be nonpartisan for two reasons. First, ending hunger is too critical to be partisan, and second, we are required to be nonpartisan by law. *If you are creating your own posts, we would ask that you remain nonpartisan so that politics doesn't get in the way of your message.* If this is something you are concerned about, you can always just share our posts instead!



Social Media Tips for Partner Agencies

Download the slides and watch the recording for RBFB's August 2021 Storytelling & Social Media for Advocacy webinar. Reach out to RBFB's Director of Marketing & Communications, with specific questions.

Social Media Strategy Resources

There are many resources available for nonprofits on crafting a social media policy, but these are a few of our favorites.

- ***LinkedIn's Social Media for Nonprofits: How to Make an Impact*** provides an overview for getting started.
- ***Five Quick Social Media Tips for Nonprofit Leaders*** shares succinct ways to improve your online presence and stay up-to-date on social media trends.
- ***Hubspot's The Ultimate Guide to Nonprofit Marketing in 2021*** has a downloadable guide and other resources to help plan a comprehensive marketing strategy.
- ***Wild Apricot's The Ultimate Social Media Guide for Nonprofits*** is an online guide that will walk you through choosing platforms, recent trends, and much more.
- ***Nonprofit Tech for Good*** sends a weekly newsletter with articles on using technology for nonprofit fundraising and marketing.
- ***Canva for Nonprofits*** is a user-friendly, cloud-based, free creative space for making high-quality social media graphics, newsletter designs, infographs, etc. The upgraded version with access to thousands of free images, graphics, and designs is free for nonprofit organizations.
- Examples of organizations using communication channels for engaging audiences in advocacy work: ***Charity: Water, Team Rubicon, and Humans of New York.***

Last updated August 2021

Writing Letters to the Editor and Opinion Pieces

Letters to the Editor (LTEs) and opinion pieces such as op-eds are a great way to educate your communities and your elected officials on the face of hunger in America. Congress-people will read the LTEs in their hometown papers before they read the national or local news as a way to get a feel for which issues their constituents care about. Neighbors and friends read them and will learn more about your passion. Keep the following tips in mind when drafting your LTE:

- 1. Focus on your local papers** – print and hyper-local journalism sites, which often only have an online presence. Since the paper’s readers are your neighbors, you can write directly to them, making your LTE more persuasive. Your letter will more likely be published in a local paper than a national paper like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. If you are unsure which would be the best paper to submit to, research newspapers in Illinois and Iowa.
- 2. Check on the newspaper’s website to see if they have specific guidelines for submitting LTEs.** Some may prefer you submit by e-mail, others may prefer their website, and all will have a word count limit. This is typically around 250 words for an LTE and 600 -800 for an opinion piece.
- 3. Stick to only one major topic in your LTE, with just two or three key pieces of information to support your point of view.** Stress your experience volunteering with or using the food bank services to lend credibility to your writing. Make certain that your facts are correct.
- 4. Check your grammar and spelling.** Have a friend proofread and comment on your draft letter to be sure you are making your point clearly. If you are short on time, be sure you use spell and grammar check in your word processor and use a free online grammar checking tool.
- 5. Include your complete contact information - name, address, telephone number(s), and e-mail address in your LTE.** If a newspaper likes your LTE, a staff member will generally contact you to make sure you are the person who wrote the letter.

If your LTE gets published, email the link (or send a copy) to RFBF, and we will share it in our newsletter and on our social media channels as well!



Contacting Elected Officials

First and most importantly, you need to know who your representatives are. My Reps is a helpful tool for looking up your elected representatives at the federal, state, and local levels. This site will also provide direct phone calls to their office and links to their websites and social media platforms.

Next, you will need to decide what you are going to say (see sample phone script and email on page 21). Whether you choose to write the office or make a phone call, the overall structure of the content will be the same and include these elements.

- Your full name and address demonstrates you are a constituent who lives in the district. Some offices will not even pay attention to the request with this verification.
- A brief (1-2 sentence) summary of why you are calling. You will want to include any personal experience or expertise here.
- Specific details about why you support (or oppose) an issue. Be sure to include any specific bill numbers if you have them.
- A concise statement about what specific action you want your representative to take.

If you want, you can add more information to a written letter by sharing personal stories and additional supporting data and facts, but it's not necessary. What is most important is making sure the staffer reading the letter or answering the phone:

1. Knows you are a constituent, and
2. Understands exactly what you are asking your representative to do.

Writing or Calling

Keep in mind the contact from constituents is a data game for office staffers. Every communication – phone call, email, webform, letter – is coded and counted as a “for” or “against” a particular issue. In cases of electronic communication, this is typically done automatically by a program that looks for keywords. Phone calls and handwritten letters need to be entered individually.

Ultimately, whether you call or write is up to you. You should choose whichever format makes you the most comfortable because if you are comfortable, you are confident. If you are confident, you are more likely to be taken seriously.



Before 9/11, the convention was that a handwritten letter, stamped and sent in the mail, was the most impactful way to make sure your opinion was heard. Some organizations would advise that, in a Congressperson's mind, if one person takes the time to handwrite a letter, then at least 30 other people must have the same opinion. Since 9/11, and anthrax scares, mail sent to Congress gets forwarded to an offsite facility to be irradiated and then delivered to offices. This process may delay mail up to two weeks. ***If you can handwrite a letter and send it far enough in advance that it is delivered before a vote, this can have a tremendous impact because people simply don't handwrite letters anymore.***

Since 9/11, the convention is that phone calls are now a better way to make an impact. If the staffer who answers the phone gets overwhelmed with calls and cannot answer them all, they are transferred to other people on the team. So if many of calls come in, it means that the whole office is answering the calls. The elected official will hear the phones ringing and ask the team what the calls are about. ***If you are comfortable making calls and can do this during office hours, this is a very effective way to communicate.*** You can also call after hours and leave a message, but you don't get the same "phones ringing off the hook" effect.

If you are simply more comfortable writing than calling, you have a couple of options:

- **Individual office websites will have a contact form you can fill out** – and you will choose the topic for the subject, and sometimes it will even ask you to click a "support" "oppose" box.
- **If you can get a hold of your representative's direct email or that of a staffer**, you can be assured a live person (rather than keyword software) will see it before it goes into the system to be counted.
- **Use a tool like Resistbot, which will identify your representatives based on your zip code, allow you to draft the letter, and then take care of the opening and closing for you.** If you like to text or spend time on Facebook, this is an excellent tool to consider. It will also ask you if they can tweet your message for additional effect. If you need to write to multiple representatives about the same issue, this is very convenient.

Although RBFB does not anticipate making this investment, Feeding America and other food banks have the tools to draft the letter for you, so you only need to add your name and address. These software programs are very convenient but sometimes, multiple letters with the same message tend to get looked over by staffers as not being as authentic as individual letters. That said, sometimes, you might not have time to draft an original letter, and if that is the case, a form letter is better than not contacting your representatives at all. Your opinion will still be counted, it just won't leave as long-lasting an impression on the team. A sample phone script or email is on the next page.

Sample Phone Script or Email



Hi, my name is XXXXX, and I live in Rep. XXXX's district. I am contacting the office to ask that the Congressperson does all s/he can to ensure that the upcoming Child Nutrition Bill is passed and includes provisions to strengthen summer meal programs.

As a volunteer at the River Bend Food Bank, I think it is as important to pass anti-hunger legislation to provide healthy food to families experiencing hunger.

A strong Child Nutrition Bill will include provisions for:

1. A Summer electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card for low-income families with children during the summer months and when schools are not in session so families can supplement their household food budgets,
2. Allow kids to consume meals off-site, which would enable communities to adopt innovative program models to reach children who lack access to a summer feeding site, and
3. Align the area eligibility requirement for summer feeding and educational programs to allow more learning programs to offer meals in the summer.

I ask that the Congressperson support the upcoming Child Nutrition Bill so that our community can be sure that summertime does not mean that more students are going hungry.

Thank you for your attention and support in this matter.

Sincerely,
NAME



Meeting with your Elected Officials

Meetings with elected officials (or any government representative) are the most effective way to be sure that you get your message across and advocate for those who are hungry in your communities. Meetings allow you to develop more personal relationships by going over the issues, sharing results, answering questions, and understanding your officials' priorities and concerns.

Meetings can take place in the representative's office, on a virtual platform, or you could invite them to your food pantry and see your work firsthand. You can approach these officials as an individual organization, or with other social service partners in a coalition.

Setting up your Meeting

To request a meeting with one or all of your elected officials, call the district office (the number is on their website) and ask for the "scheduler." Tell them that you would like to arrange a meeting with the elected official to talk about efforts being made to address food insecurity in your district.

The scheduler may ask you to email your meeting request (see samples on page 26), which should include:

- Names people attending,
- Proposed dates,
- Contact information for the person arranging the meeting, and
- (If applicable) Information on the specific legislation you would like to discuss (include bill numbers if possible). This will help the staffer prepare notes for the government official.

If you cannot get a meeting with your elected official(s) or their staff, ask the office for a schedule of the upcoming town hall meetings. Town hall meetings are a chance for elected officials to meet constituents and hear their concerns. You can use this as an opportunity to express your concerns about food insecurity in our area.



Preparing for your Meeting

After the meeting is confirmed, email the advocacy team at RBFB. They can share the most current fact sheets and talking points on hunger-related issues. Other ways you can prepare for the meeting include:

- Check the elected official's legislative record to verify if they are a co-sponsor of any piece of legislation that you want to discuss. If they are, instead of discussing the bill's details, you will want to start the meeting by thanking them for their support for that piece of legislation and discuss other bills in more detail. Check www.thomas.gov for information on federal bills, www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook for Iowa, and <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/> for Illinois.
- Think about ways to incorporate your personal experience with the topic you are discussing. For example, if you are a parent that has experienced hunger, be open about how that affected your child's education and health. If you volunteer at the food bank, share a story about a person you met who made an impression on you.
- If you plan to go with a group of people, you will want to have a preparation meeting. This probably won't take very long, but it will give everyone a chance to decide who is leading the discussion and what talking points each person will cover (try to limit it to three asks, more than that will make you seem unfocused). If you are going with a group, be sure the office knows because they will want to arrange the appropriate seating.
- Practice talking points if you can, so you can be as professional and respectful as possible without having to look at your notes. This will help make sure your issues are taken seriously (see lobby meeting guidelines).



Attending the Meeting

If you have taken all of the above steps, you and your group will be fully prepared to meet your elected official. Don't be discouraged if the meeting is very short. The length of a typical meeting is generally 15-30 minutes, but sometimes they will be called away early. Other items to keep in mind:

- **Present Yourself as a Constituent** – Your most important asset in the eyes of your elected official is that you are their constituent.
- **Dress Professionally** – A professional appearance will convey respect for your MoC and ensure that you are taken seriously.
- **Be on time** – Though this is obvious, make sure everyone in the group knows when and where the meeting is, has directions, and arrives 5-10 minutes early.
- **Manage your time** – Be aware of how long your meeting is scheduled to last and manage the discussion so you can raise all your key concerns and leave time for your questions to be answered. Focus on your main points first in case things must be cut short.
- **Respect** – Though we do not always agree with our elected officials on every issue, it is vital to use this opportunity to focus on what they can do in the future.
- **Be appreciative** – Before leaving, don't forget to thank the elected officials for their time and willingness to have an open discussion with you.
- **Leave a fact sheet** – The elected officials or their staff may want to refer to some of the vital issue points later.
- **Take a Picture** – Share it on social media, thanking and tagging your representatives.



When are your Elected Officials in District?



Congress is in session throughout the year. While you can find the official calendars on the House of Representatives and Senate websites, here a couple times your Congresspeople are generally in district.

- Two weeks in spring, around Easter and/or school breaks
- A week around the 4th of July
- The month of August
- One-two weeks in fall, more during an election year
- One week at Thanksgiving
- Three-four weeks for holidays/new year.

Iowa Legislature is in session from January through April.

Illinois Legislature is in session from January through May, and then again for two weeks in October/November for a veto session. Unlike Iowa, the House and Senate keep separate calendars.

Reporting Back

After the meeting, let RBFB know how the meeting went! Please be sure to include the names of the attendees, any staffers in the room, what you discussed, and the elected official's thoughts on the issue. Don't forget the photo!

Following Up

Send a short thank-you note (see sample on the following page) to reinforce the importance of the issues and their support. Don't forget to share what it means to you as a constituent. If your representative has not signed on to support the bill, it is helpful to send periodic updates as it moves through the legislative process and encourages action. If they sign on, be sure to send another thank you.

Sample Meeting Request



Dear [Scheduler's Name]:

I am writing to request a meeting with Congressperson XXXXXXX while s/he is in-district during the MONTH recess to discuss their stand on what Congress is doing to fight food insecurity in our area. These issues are very important to me (and the other members from the district who will be joining me).

I will follow up with you in the next couple of days to finalize the meeting – but you can reach me before then at DAYTIME TELEPHONE NUMBER as well as via email (ADDRESS). I look forward to meeting with the Congressperson to discuss these critical issues.

Sincerely,
[Full Name, Address]

Sample Meeting Agenda Template

- Introductions: Include who you are and why you are involved the fight to end hunger
 - Discuss each piece of legislation
 - >> Background: include some statistics about the issues you are discussing.
 - >> About the Bill: Who introduced the bill, who are co-sponsors (either from your state or from their party), what would the bill achieve, why is that important.
 - >> The “Ask”: Depending on where the bill is in the legislative process, you can ask if your Member of Congress would introduce the bill in Congress, co-sponsor the bill, or vote in support of the bill. If you are not sure which you should ask for, contact RFBF.
 - Closing – reaffirm your asks.
 - Thank you’s.
-

Sample Thank You Letter

Dear Representative X,

Thank you for taking time out of your day to meet with us and discuss the food insecurity and XXXXX (legislation piece of legislation that you discussed).

If passed, this crucial legislation will help XXXXXXX (Reinforce what you said in the meeting here).

Again, we are grateful to have met with you and hope that you will choose to co-sponsor this critical life-saving legislation.

Sincerely,
[Full Name, Address]



USING ELECTIONS TO YOUR ADVANTAGE



Elections present a unique opportunity to educate candidates and the public about anti-hunger issues. From school board to president, elected officials make decisions about policies that can help reduce hunger in your community. But three factors make elections stand out from other advocacy situations.

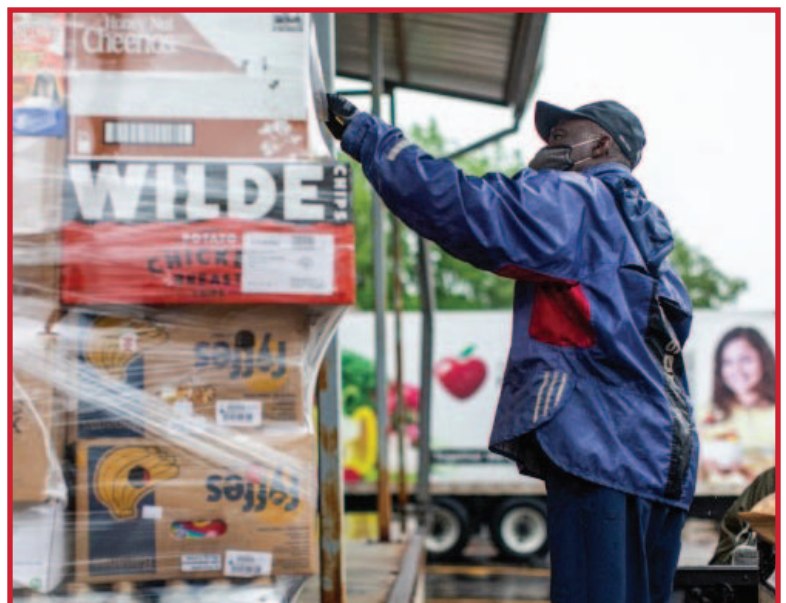
1. Candidates are actively soliciting questions from the public to show they can be responsive to the issues the public believes are critical to helping their community. If a candidate is not ready for the question, they may pivot with a “non-answer” at first, but s/he will be prepared for it the next time someone asks about anti-hunger issues.
2. Events are public, so everyone in attendance will hear your question and the candidate’s answer. Someone in the audience may have never considered the problem of hunger in their community before, and your question could result in your organization getting a new volunteer.
3. The media covers candidates and their events, providing a much larger audience that you can educate on anti-hunger issues. Sometimes the media may even be interested enough to follow up with you later and do a story about your organization.

So how should your organization take advantage of elections to get your message out?

Questionnaires for candidates are a great way to start. Compile a list of questions for every candidate and then uniformly present their answers. Questions could include:

- How many people in the district you want to represent are food insecure? (If you are unsure, you can check Map the Meal Gap on Feeding America’s site.)
- How often have you visited a food pantry, meal site, or food bank in your district? What was your key takeaway?
- If elected [insert office], how will you use your office to decrease the number of people who experience food insecurity?
- If elected, would you support [policy name] as a vital way to decrease the number of people who experience food insecurity?

By asking the candidates all the same questions and presenting answers in one document, it is clear to the public that you are not supporting one candidate over the other.



Organize a debate with other social service agencies in your district or find a non-partisan group organization that will allow you to submit questions for their event. Debates are another way to show the public that you are providing all the candidates the same opportunity to address anti-hunger issues.

In-person debates should be planned well in advance and have many moving parts (including but not limited to creating debate rules, finding a skilled moderator, sending invitations, marketing, event planning, and planning for security). Holding a virtual debate (through Zoom, Facebook, WebEx, or another online meeting platform) will simplify the planning and sometimes result in a larger audience but require people skilled running the platform – fielding questions and keeping candidates to their time limits. Whichever format you choose, be sure to have other organizations working with you. As more organizations get involved, the more likely the candidates will participate and the larger the potential audience for your event.

Bird-dogging candidates can also be an effective tactic, especially in races where candidates are holding multiple public events. Bird-dogging involves having staff or volunteers attend events to generate visibility for the fight to end hunger in our communities. This could be handing the candidate a packet of information while wearing a shirt representing your organization or asking the candidate how they will fight food insecurity if elected.

To be effective (and not be accused of partisanship), you need to plan these opportunities strategically. You should be sure you can at least try to reach all the candidates through this tactic. Your team (staff and volunteers) should be prepared in advance and sent with talking points, so they are asking the same questions. The downside of this tactic is that you cannot guarantee that your team be chosen to ask the candidate a question. The upside is that if done well, bird-dogging can generate additional (free) media for your organization and issue.

Whether you are asking presidential candidates about increasing SNAP benefits to match inflation or quizzing someone running for school board about supporting a district-wide school lunch program, don't be shy about your passion for ending hunger in your community. And since you always know when elections will happen, they are an excellent opportunity to plan strategically and raise awareness about the face of food insecurity in your service area.





GLOSSARY OF ANTI-HUNGER TERMS / ACRONYMS



- An **appropriations bill** is a law of Congress that provides an agency with budget authority to run a program. An appropriation allows the agency to incur obligations and to make payments from the U.S. Treasury for specified purposes.
- **Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR)** is how Congress funds programs to improve the health, nutrition, and well-being of children across the country. While this process is supposed to occur every five years, the last reauthorization bill last passed in 2010. This does not mean funding for the programs stops, but it does mean they cannot be updated to reflect current needs.
Programs funded under the CNR include:
 - > School-based USDA programs such as the School Breakfast Program, the National School Lunch Program, and the Special Milk Program.
 - > The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) funds programs aimed at children and teens to serve free healthy meals and snacks in low-income areas when school is out for the summer.
 - > The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) funds after-school programs for low-income kids and senior centers to serve participants healthy meals.
- The **Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)** is a USDA program that assists low-income seniors (60+) by providing nutritious food. CSFP is authorized through the Farm Bill.
- The **Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)** is a USDA Commodities program that provides food to partner agencies, who in turn distribute it through their programs. Food banks and partner agencies voluntarily participate in this program. TEFAP is authorized through the Farm Bill.
- The **Farm Bill** is an omnibus package of legislation that covers not only agricultural policy, but also nutrition, trade, conservation, forestry, and rural development programs, just to name a few. It is updated every five years and will be up for debate in Congress again in 2023.
- **Omnibus** legislation is single bill that combines diverse subjects.
- **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)** is a USDA program that helps low-income women with foods, nutrition and breastfeeding education, and healthcare access until the child is 5 years old. WIC is authorized through CNR.
- **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** gives people struggling with low household income extra help buying fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods. SNAP is funded by the federal government and distributed by individual states. If you live in River Bend Food Bank's service area, you can reach out to our SNAP Coordinator to learn if you qualify. SNAP is authorized through the Farm Bill.
- The **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)** is a U.S. Department of Health & Human Services that provides funding to states to help low-income families *with children*. States use TANF to fund programs and cash assistance to help families pay for food, shelter, utilities, and non-medical expenses.



FINAL THOUGHTS



Thank you again for donating your voice to help end hunger in our community. Whether you are championing anti-hunger issues with your friends at a party, volunteering at a food pantry, or meeting with your Congressperson, every effort you make is appreciated. The fight to end hunger can only be won if everyone pitches in.

Feedback

If you have any thoughts about what is presented in this guide (or if you think something is missing), please email us your thoughts! We want this tool to be as helpful to our staff, volunteers, and partner agencies as possible, and this can only happen with your input.

