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# FEEDING URBAN POOR IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL

## *An Interview with Rev. Charles Parker*

by Nicole Ballenger and Carl Mabbs-Zeno

*Many policy makers and analysts do not have an opportunity to closely examine how national policies are implemented in communities and how program recipients are affected by the programs. This interview of Rev. Charles Parker by Nicole Ballenger and Carl Mabbs-Zeno focuses on the implementation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Emergency Food Assistance Program at the local level in the Nation's Capital, Washington, DC.*

*Rev. Charles Parker is Director of Bread for the City, the largest private, direct food assistance organization in Washington, DC.*

Ballenger and Mabbs-Zeno initiated their interview by asking Charles Parker, "What is Bread for the City?"

**Parker:** Bread for the City was founded about 15 years ago by a coalition of five churches in Northwest Washington, DC who got together to try to coordinate their ministry to the community a little more effectively. The focus of the program since the beginning has been food distribution.

Bread's work has evolved over the years. Today it focuses primarily on folks who are in homes and have some sort of income, but are eligible for food stamps—primarily senior citizens, folks who are disabled or unable to work, and parents with dependent children. The homeless are not targeted because the food we distribute typically has to be further prepared. Our clients come to Bread at whatever point in the month that their food stamps or their social security runs out. We give them about three-days' supply of food for three meals a day that will hopefully see them through until their next check comes in.

**NB/CM-Z:** Is the bag of food designed for a family? Can different members of a family come in and get different bags of food, or is it for a family unit?

**Parker:** We usually make up bags for single persons and add in food depending on how many are in the family. We have nutritionists come in to make sure the food bags are fairly well rounded nutritionally.

**NB/CM-Z:** Does Bread provide other services in conjunction with the food?

**Parker:** The food is the largest in terms of budgeting and staffing. We currently feed about 2600 families per month at three sites in the District of Columbia. We also distribute clothing, which is all donated and given away free of charge. There are no eligibility requirements for clothing, so a lot more of the homeless community may make use of this service. You probably saw a line of folks outside when you came in. They are waiting for clothes. We give out probably a hundred thousand articles of clothing a year. A fairly high volume of business! Actually, it could be quite a lot more if we had better storage facilities.

We also provide counseling and referral services. We run a program jointly with a medical clinic, called the Jane Adams Program, that screens people for a variety of government entitlement programs. It's actually funded with two Federal outreach grants. One to do food stamp outreach and one to do supplemental security income. We also network with the local government to try and make the process as smooth as possible.

**NB/CM-Z:** What attracts people to Bread?

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*Nicole Ballenger is Chief of the Resource Policy Branch, Resources and Technology Division, and Carl Mabbs-Zeno is Leader of the Policy Measurement Section, Trade and Development Branch, Agriculture and Trade Analysis Division, ERS.*

**Parker:** The food is really the draw. They come in for a bag of food and by doing a little bit of screening we can often uncover a lot of other needs that we can help with. For example, we also work with the medical clinic and a free legal clinic that helps people with public benefit problems and landlord-tenant problems. We've gotten clients 7, 8, 9 thousand dollars in back VA [Veterans Administration] benefits or social security benefits.

**NB/CM-Z:** Tell us about your staff. What is the role of volunteers in Bread's program?

**Parker:** Bread has always been open from 9 in the morning to 5 in the afternoon. It is hard to get volunteers in for those hours. However, this was more an excuse than reality. About a year and a half ago, we started working closely with the medical clinic around the corner to try to coordinate our services a little bit more effectively. We noted that the clinic is almost entirely volunteer run. This observation led us to place more emphasis on obtaining the services of volunteers.

Currently, about 50 volunteers work in the Jane Adams program, and about 130 in the legal program, mostly lawyers and paralegals doing landlord-tenant and public benefits work. And, for food and clothing distributions, we probably have another 40 or 50 volunteers. So, it's a couple of hundred. Not as many as it could be. We need to continue working on that.

**NB/CM-Z:** Do you tend to see the same clientele month after month, year after year; or are you finding people moving out and becoming less dependent on your services?

**Parker:** Our current base is probably seven thousand families, give or take, of which we see 2600 in a month. Of that 2600, probably 22 to 23 hundred are returning clients. And between 300 and 400 are new clients. Our client base is not people whose situation, in general, will ever change. They're senior citizens who are on fixed incomes—they are not going to get new jobs and start working. Or they are permanently disabled and not able to work. Or they are on disability and they are not going to start working again. So of the three categories of clients we have, the only category with a good possibility of improving their status is the parents with children. Some of those—once we start coming out of the recession—will start getting jobs. But probably a significant number will never be employed again.

**NB/CM-Z:** When you've testified to Congress, you've said that probably 90 plus percent of your clients are eligible for food stamps, but a much smaller percentage actually get them. How big is the gap? Why does it exist?

**Parker:** We deal with a large number of elderly. For a variety of reasons many elderly do not want to apply for food stamps even if they meet the eligibility requirements. The issue is why they don't apply. The city statistics indicate that only around 45 percent of District residents who are eligible participate in food stamps.

My suspicion is that if getting food stamps was a gentler process, you'd have a lot more seniors participating. Seniors often can't sit around for several hours waiting for a food stamp appointment. They can't line up outside the food stamp door for several hours before the food stamp office can open. It's a very difficult process for them. That's what we need to start working on.

**NB/CM-Z:** Here at Bread...what are the eligibility requirements?

**Parker:** As I mentioned earlier, we serve the elderly, disabled, and parents with dependent children. We verify their addresses and that their income falls below 165 percent of the Federally established poverty line. If someone has a food stamp or SSI card—proof that they have qualified for these programs—then we use this information to complete our own certification process.

**NB/CM-Z:** You serve a lot of people, and there are a lot of people who are suspicious that those people who come and get food don't really need it—that they just take the taxpayers' money and go around the corner and sell the food to buy drugs. How do we know that people you serve consume the food themselves?

**Parker:** There are certain folks who do abuse the system. And that leaves us all open to that sort of criticism. But my experience has been that it's a very, very small portion.

I remember being quite angry about a year or two ago about a big banner newspaper headline that said "food stamp fraud." You know, huge letters this high. When you read through the article, you learn that food stamp fraud accounts for about 1.5 percent of the food stamp budget. And not all of this was fraud by the participants! Now, that made me really angry because for the folks who don't really read the article what they get is "food stamp fraud" and that is what they remember.

I do a lot of speaking to church groups and schools and all over—and this question always comes up. When you ask people what they would expect a fraud rate to be in a program like food stamps, they're always saying "40 percent, 50 percent." Huge numbers in relation to the reality of 1.5 percent.

Now, having said that, there are people who do try to abuse the system and we do what we can to keep that from happening. We verify eligibility when people come in for food. We verify that they are elderly, disabled, or are parents. We verify their residence and we verify their income. We don't always do that the first time they come in. We will often take them on their word the first time and give them a bag of food and tell them what kind of verification they need to bring in the next time they come if they want to get food again. So, there certainly are people who will abuse that trust on some level. But we are fairly rigorous in terms of checking out what people tell us. And if they don't bring in verifications, they don't get food again.

**NB/CM-Z:** For those who are homeless...how far do they have to go from here to find a place where they can get a prepared meal?

USDA's Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) channels food to qualifying low-income American households through State agencies and local emergency food providers. The program was implemented on a temporary basis in 1982 when commodity surpluses acquired through price-support operations by USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) were at record-high levels and an outlet was desirable. TEFAP has since been reauthorized several times, most recently by the 1990 Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act. The 1990 Act removed the "temporary" from the program's title and authorized USDA purchases of foods to be distributed through the program, along with available commodity surpluses, through 1995. Despite the legislative extensions and the growing use of non-surplus foods, the value of TEFAP commodities fell sharply after the 1988 drought and the decline in CCC stocks. This value was about \$200 million in 1991 in contrast with over \$1 billion in 1984.

TEFAP is small compared to the \$14 billion Food Stamp Program, which is the main approach to assisting low-income U.S. households with food needs. However, as Rev. Parker discusses in this interview, TEFAP can be an important source of supplemental food to needy households and provide budgetary support to community service entities. One policy question is whether there should be a permanent role for food distribution through Federal programs independent of the level of commodity surpluses acquired through price-support operations.

**Parker:** Central Union Mission is right up here about at 14th and R for men for dinner. Bethany Woemn's Day Shelter is this white building right next to us. They serve breakfast and lunch for homeless women, and there is dinner in the main shelter at night. Zacchaeus Community Kitchen is down at 11th and G.

**NB/CM-Z:** How do you obtain the food that's in the bags?

**Parker:** Most of it is purchased. Bread for the City is currently running about an \$800,000 budget annually and most of that goes into food purchasing. We do get some food donated from food drives, from corporations, and by the U.S. Department of Agriculture through TEFAP [the Emergency Food Assistance Program]. For instance, infant formula is donated and we work with the local USDA WIC [Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children] office to supply women who have signed up for WIC appointments with formula and food to tide them over until their WIC appointment happens. We also get food from the Capitol Area Community Food Bank, which is all sold at 14 cents a pound. So that's pretty cheap.

**NB/CM-Z:** And the money...what's the source?

**Parker:** The largest source is individual contributions. We also receive significant support from foundations, the religious community, and the Combined Federal Campaign. A small portion is corporate giving, and Federal funding also accounts for a small share. For example, the Jane Adams Program got off the ground with Federal outreach grants.

**NB/CM-Z:** Let's talk for a few minutes about the USDA food program, TEFAP, and how it actually works. How do you get TEFAP food? Who determines how much you get and when?

**Parker:** The D.C. Department of Education actually works out the schedule. They get TEFAP food from the Federal Government. As you know, each state can have a different body administer its participation in TEFAP, but in DC it's the Department of Education.

Basically, the Department of Education distributes the TEFAP food based on the statistics we give them about how much food we're giving away. So if we see more people and give away more food, we get more food from them. This approach is advantageous to us. Today Bread is the District's largest noncommercial distributor of groceries directly to citizens. The Capitol Area Community Food Bank obviously gives out in tonnage more groceries, but in terms of direct service providers we're the largest in the city so that we get a relatively good percentage of whatever comes in. But Education decides where it's going.

**NB/CM-Z:** How much of Bread's food does TEFAP account for?

**Parker:** We had budgeted this year for TEFAP to account for about 10 percent of what we give away. And actually I'm having to revamp that because we have had so little TEFAP food since last summer. This has been a real problem for us and I'm not sure actually what the reasons for the small

amounts are. I budgeted based on last year's figures because TEFAP had the same amount appropriated nationwide—I understand \$120 million—and we've just seen very little food.

**NB/CM-Z:** So, assuming that the food is actually coming in, how much influence do you have over what kinds of foods you get? Can you put in a request for special types of foods?

**Parker:** No, we have little influence. They do send out a yearly flyer—a questionnaire about what foods we use the most of, and which are the most popular. What impact I've had on buying, I have no idea. But there are no specific requests. Essentially, Education will call up and say we have 80 cases of peanut butter for you, or whatever.

**NB/CM-Z:** How much lag is there between the call and when you have to pick it up?

**Parker:** Generally they're fairly laid back about it—saying if you can get it out this week, that would be great. They occasionally will say we've got to have it out fast. But in general they try to be cooperative with us. We can pull it very quickly if we have to. A couple of years ago, they called me one day and said that they had 15 tons of food that they wanted and I had to have it out in 2 days. This was 2 days before Christmas. Giant Food Company was nice enough to loan me a tractor trailer. I pulled the whole thing out in a day.

**NB/CM-Z:** Did you have storage for that much?

**Parker:** I got someone to donate some storage space for a couple of months.

**NB/CM-Z:** Do the types of USDA foods change fairly regularly and, if so, is it difficult to deal with a continually changing mix of food?

**Parker:** It does vary a fair amount. I essentially buy as if no USDA food were coming in and when it does come in I substitute. I buy peanut butter because it's a staple and we always give it out.

I never want to be short of it. But if USDA calls up and says "we've got a hundred cases of peanut butter for you," that's great. That saves me having to purchase quite as regularly. I'll take the USDA peanut butter and use that until it's gone and then I'll continue using our own. Same thing with USDA vegetables and meat, the only difference being that if there are items that don't fit in with our normal three-day supply of food, that's just extra. I just put those in. For instance, flour and cornmeal. I won't purchase flour and cornmeal, in general. But if I get it from USDA, I'll give it out. And that's just an additional item.

I do depend on the TEFAP program commodities, but I don't rely on getting specific items. I purchase as if it was not coming in because I need to keep the bags nutritionally balanced and with a certain amount of food in them. Because I have no idea what's coming from USDA or when it may come, I can't afford to not order



*"We usually make up bags for single persons and add in food depending on how many are in the family."*

*Photo: Carl Mabbs-Zeno*

something hoping the USDA will send some TEFAP food over.

I do rely on it, however, in terms of my budgeting process. I assume we will get in a certain amount of food and the kind of expansion we do in terms of being able to take on more clients is based on how much money I think I can raise, and on how much food I think I can get from the USDA.

**NB/CM-Z:** Bread was a TEFAP participant way back in the beginning, wasn't it?

**Parker:** The TEFAP food used to be a very significant portion of our budget when I started here on August 22, 1988. Our budget was about \$500,000 prior to 1988 and half of that was TEFAP food—about \$250,000. So there was much lower purchasing of food at that point on our part. In fiscal year 87-88, TEFAP supplied \$258,000 worth of food; in fiscal year 88-89, that dropped to \$70,000. So the availability of food was cut \$190,000 that year, which hit us very hard. We had to cut back the number of people we were serving because the fundraising couldn't cover that. That was a very painful period for us.

**NB/CM-Z:** Have you been able to adjust and expand?

**Parker:** We had to cut our food distribution way back and now we're rebuilding, and we have rebuilt past where we were. It was a very long and painful process and a lot of hard work. We had to cut back from serving the entire city to serving just the NW quadrant, which is where our two sites were at that point. And telling all those people who were coming across town and didn't have any pantries in the Southeast and Northeast to go to—telling them that we couldn't help them—was very difficult. Emotionally draining.

**NB/CM-Z:** A group that doesn't always support the USDA commodity distribution programs is the hunger advocacy groups like FRAC [Food Research Action Committee], for example. FRAC, and others in this group, would really rather see the resources go into food stamps. Can you comment on that?

**Parker:** Food stamps is a great program and, if I was in charge of how the money was distributed, I'd put a ton more money into food stamps. In an ideal world I'd probably eliminate TEFAP. I'd make sure everybody who's eligible for stamps is getting them and I'd make sure the benefit levels are adequate—that's a better way to get people food on their table than TEFAP. And I agree with FRAC on that.

In a somewhat less than ideal world, that is, a world where I'm not in charge of all government spending, TEFAP is a very important way to get food to people who are not getting adequate food stamps and to people who are not getting food stamps at all. It really does plug up a lot of cracks because so many different people distribute it, including church groups, pantries, and soup kitchens, and a whole range of folks who have access to people who aren't plugged into the food stamp program.

**NB/CM-Z:** You've been able to cut back your dependence on USDA foods dramatically, but it's probably been a huge effort to do that and you have a very well organized, very well run effort. Most of the other places are little, many operating out of church doors.



*"Our current base is probably seven thousand families, give or take, of which we see 2600 in a month."*

*Photo: Carl Mabbs-Zeno*

**Parker:** I know for a fact that a number of small pantries closed their doors when TEFAP dropped off. And even some significant pantries, like Cooperative Urban Ministry Center over here at 9th and P. They run a fairly significant budget—a couple of hundred thousand dollars. And money has just been very, very hard to come by. Without any USDA food, they've been running a huge deficit. I don't think they've closed, but they were talking about closing in December.

Now that's not all due to USDA—it's a combination of not getting enough USDA food and not being able to raise adequate monies to compensate. We were very lucky. The smaller pantries are operating close enough to the margin all the time that they can't do what Bread has done.

**NB/CM-Z:** If you could ask USDA for a change in the program—other than more food or a bigger budget for the program and for other food programs—what would you ask for?

**Parker:** More consistency in delivery and volume. It's very, very hard to plan with USDA. I'm able to do that because I have enough of a budget to buy all the stuff I need. But if you're a smaller pantry you probably won't give out peanut butter if USDA doesn't give it to you.

On the positive side, one of the things that USDA does well on some of the items is supply cooking directions. Those are very helpful, especially for some folks who may not use flour and cornmeal, for instance, very often. The cookbook that USDA puts out could be more widely available. **C**