

Brian Jacks

Interviewer: Emily Sorensen

Editor: Shreya Mitra and Kim Niewolny

Associate State Director, AARP Virginia

Brian Jacks is currently an Associate State Director of AARP Virginia. He is primarily engaged in alleviating immediate hunger needs. He has an inclination to work towards food and nutritional needs of senior citizens. He wants to see AARP join the crusade against hunger by utilizing its resources, expertise, and assets to be a catalyst towards seniors' issues of hunger. He is also hopeful that food councils can play a role in successfully driving out hunger and food insecurity. Brian stresses the importance of the community in playing a role in developing a food secure, healthy food system.

Keywords: food council, facilitator, hunger, senior citizen, Virginia

I am currently an Associate State Director of AARP Virginia, and I am responsible for community outreach. I cover the specific issue of senior hunger throughout the entire state of Virginia. I have had the position for more than 10 years. Approximately five years ago, AARP chose the issue of hunger and the "Drive to End Hunger" work, sponsored by the AARP Foundation. I have been responsible for that for the entire five years here in Virginia. I recently had the opportunity to be a guest speaker at the Feeding America Southwest donor luncheon for 2015. This opportunity was encouraging and a good reminder of the needs that are out there.

AARP tackles a number of different issues. I believe I was presented with the option of leading the issue for hunger versus some of the other options like caregiving, senior housing,

grandparents raising grandchildren, or senior fraud. I was probably given the choice. I thought that it was something I would like to learn more about and in a way make a difference. It was an issue that resonated with me on a personal level. Although I cannot think of any one specific example or a dramatic life event that lead me to make that choice, we are living in the world of hunger. The compelling stories and the life experiences related to food insecurity that have been shared with me are amazing and now it makes even more sense. We heard stories from partner organizations that connect with individuals. They shared the stories of children going to school without breakfast or not having anything to eat the night before. Individuals working at some of the local pantries shared stories of going into people's homes who would say, "Hey, I have no food at all, and I want to show you that I have no food." They opened up every cabinet and the refrigerator to show that all of the shelves are bare. Rural locations often have individuals who live tens of miles away from grocery stores that sell different types of healthy nutritious food. Sometimes the limited resources of non-profit organizations are a hindrance by itself towards executing good and effective work. There are people who are economically strained, which sometimes prohibits them from being able to purchase local, healthy food and the quantity of food that they need to feed their families. Another harsh truth about the Appalachian region is that oftentimes individuals are struggling with addiction or they are in jail. This condition has changed the home situation and family dynamics. We see grandparents raising grandchildren with very limited means or income and limited skills. It is not enough to effectively feed the broader family in a way that would encourage and enable good health.

I'm thankful that I have the opportunity to make a difference that I know is truly impacting families across Virginia. What my hunger work broadly looks like is that I lead food drives throughout the state of Virginia. I have been working closely with some food councils. I have worked towards increasing volunteer participation in "Meals on Wheels" programs and have teamed up with different food pantries and food banks in a number of different ways. I am primarily engaging AARP members in alleviating immediate hunger needs, and, if possible, gearing toward nutritional requirements for senior citizens. It is because of the fact that homebound seniors often have very limited access or they face transportation challenges to access healthy, nutritional food at a reasonable cost.

I got the fortune of working with the volunteers who are striving to make a difference, and I see the blessing that it is in their lives. This February in Roanoke we held the "Soup for Seniors" movement where we collected over 40,000 cans of soup that were put together in emergency food bags to go for the Meals on Wheels recipients and others during the high snow months where often drivers cannot get to homebound seniors homes. It's a blessing to watch people donating, recognizing that they have been blessed in many ways and want to give back, and working with volunteers who were sorting those food resources, packing and delivering those bags. It's a blessing to the volunteers who are participating and giving back in that way. As a family, we had the opportunity to take a bag to a homebound senior in Bedford County, not far from here, who again, just at first glance and with very limited time spent, appeared to be someone who likely was not

getting very many visitors, and had very limited economic means. This person who was outside of the service area had seen the coverage of the work that we were doing, and she had placed a call into Roanoke asking if there were any bags left. Since our family lived not too far I said I'd be happy to take one of those bags. So I had the fortune, with my family, of going out and delivering to her and just spending a little bit of time and knowing that food would make a difference in her life.

That's what motivates me most.

I'd like to focus on talking about the development of a manual that we've put forward here in Virginia, entitled *Facing Hunger in Communities: a Manual for Organizing Food Councils*. I would like to shed some light on how this came to be, the pre and the post work, and the process which is right now being tested by fledgling start-up food councils in Virginia. In 2012 here in Virginia, since AARP was somewhat new to the area of hunger, we wanted to make sure that we were allocating resources at the best possible way towards eradicating senior hunger; AARP was more focused in the area of Medicare, social security, senior fraud, and caregiving. We said we recognize that we're not experts in the field, so we would like to begin by listening and learning from others. In 2012, we held a Hunger Summit by bringing stakeholders together from across the Commonwealth to Richmond. That included state and local government officials, non-profits including food pantries, meals on wheels programs, local food networks, local growers, and also business houses. We also brought in some speakers from outside of the state. There were more than 100 attendees at that event. We heard some important perspectives from people in different areas. We primarily focused

on the question of what can be done here in Virginia to make a difference specifically in the world of senior hunger, and also hunger in a broader way. It was to find out ways at a grass root level as to how we could help facilitate a community that says, "We have a problem here in our locality, and we desire to make it better. We need to fix that problem."

We were thankful to come up with three main questions that we asked the participants who came to the summit. Firstly, how can we utilize media and publicity? Is there an awareness issue? Secondly, how can we utilize community service and volunteering- community engagement- to tackle the issues at hand? Thirdly, in what ways can we be better advocates? We got started with following up on some of the recommendations that were presented at that hunger summit in 2012. I was given the responsibility of leading a team of experts like food bank directors, officials from different localities, municipalities across Virginia, and individuals representing the area agencies on aging. It was a social services network throughout the state. We were tasked with the idea of considering how we could engage members of Virginia's population in the best possible way so that they can make a difference right where they live. It was a team of about ten to twelve individuals including director of the "Meals on Wheels" program at Seniors Connections in Richmond, Virginia. That is one of our state's area agencies on aging. There was also an executive director of a food bank out of one of the 12 or 13 here in Virginia. There was a manager of the Fairfax area agency on aging, folks representing community pantries, the Richmond coordinator of Slow Food, and individuals that were members of food policy task forces in different regions. The SNAP outreach

consultant from the Virginia Department of Social Services and AARP volunteers worked together. It was kind of a broad array of folks who were concerned and were willing to give up some of their time, in addition to the normal work day, in order to consider what could be done as community based work by thinking about individuals locally.

AARP has over one million members in Virginia so it's quite a large organization, but we certainly were not sure as to how AARP members could get involved. We found that senior hunger and hunger more broadly is very much interlaced and interwoven. There are intergenerational aspects of hunger. We have done more straight hunger work that we know will benefit seniors rather than tying our hands and saying, "What we're doing has to be focused on seniors!" Whether we begin with the seniors in mind, and bring hunger to the table, or start with the player in the hunger field and bring seniors to the table, is crucial. I would prefer the second option. It was important for AARP to team up with those who care about hunger. We should consider ways as to how AARP can join the crusade against hunger by utilizing its resources, expertise, and assets to be a catalyst and at the same time be specific towards seniors' issues of hunger.

We tried to identify some best practices of the volunteers who are engaged in the fight against hunger in the communities. Many communities have diverse organizations that are responsible for fighting hunger in their community. Those might be church pantries, a food bank, the city department of social services, or the schools. Even the local growers may be involved or interested in their own way to fight hunger. In community centers there is a wide array. The senior

centers might also be working with farmer's markets in some way to increase access to nutritional food. However, what we found in the summit and in talking with others was that those communities where the organizations that came together regularly in a spirit of cooperation and teamwork—those that had groups meeting regularly, considering where to focus the energy—could actually accomplish much more than the disjointed or competitive arenas where organizations were all fighting for Kroger grocery store's day old bread, where whoever got there first would get it. Three would be upset on the one who beat them to the punch. So we said, "Okay, food councils or food system councils seem to be a need."

There are different terminologies used to represent food councils. Different food councils would say, "Well, we're not exactly a food council, but we are a food policy council," or, "We are just the community organization working to end hunger." In Floyd County, there is one organization that goes by the name of "Plenty!" that is not a council but use as a system to do their work. They incorporate everything from gleaning to capturing food resources throughout the community and making sure that it is reaching most needed localities. Plenty! is led by Karen Day, and an individual who I have not had the chance to meet. Karen has been part of our work and is very open, in a way of trying to be a help to other groups that might have similar shared goals. It is very impressive to see the way that their communication system works. They use Facebook and a website and so forth to get the word out, to showcase needs that are out there, and to gather community support. Their focus is also on the social aspect of eating together, of friends helping friends, and neighbors

helping neighbors. That has been one of the most constructive and most inspiring food organization stories.

It did not take too long for our group to formalize on the idea to help, encourage, catalyze, serve, and to energize the creation of food councils in communities in Virginia that had active interested groups or individuals who desired that type of thing, but they do not yet have a regular meeting group or organization. The council will help them to begin their work in a collaborative way. That was what the council decided upon, and became much energized in considering how we could best facilitate that. The AARP foundation paid for a consultant to work alongside the team. The committee met regularly, primarily via conference call. We began with the consultant's help to seek best food council practices not only in Virginia but across the nation by making phone calls and contacting states throughout the nation. We were pleased to have a good response and a willingness to share from individuals who had begun or were currently leading food councils in states as far away as Maine and Washington. The consultant helped capture the key points and the best practices. The good news is that over a period of about six to nine months, we were able to pull in a good array of information, and were able to structure what we had learned into the steps to organizing a food council. The manual's table of contents shows how we began outlining the different learning that we had pulled in from the very elementary stage.

With the idea of helping a group of volunteers assess what the exact needs are for their locality, we recognized that Northern Virginia is quite different from far southwest Virginia. Then we

spent some time talking about the different organizational techniques or methods from one food council to another. We intentionally created this manual not to be prescriptive but instead to be flexible to meet the needs of different regions based upon their individuality. We outlined a process of bringing stakeholders together, setting objectives, and then at least begin the discussion of how a food council could help promote them and share more broadly what their goals and objectives were to be to begin getting additional assistance within the community and ways to get the word out. Lastly, we wrapped up with the idea of program evaluation where we ensure that any work that is being done is being tracked in some way. It should have some accountability of those that make up the council, and also the council itself, as to whether it is being true to its mission and vision. We sent this out to individuals at Virginia Tech and elsewhere to make sure what we had gathered was accurate and that we were not missing anything. We took their suggestions and improvement ideas into account.

By the end of 2013 we had the manual created, and I am pleased to say that in 2014 we began sharing this with individuals who were interested in beginning a food council in their region, or that which had already begun but were requesting direction or insight or information from AARP. The manual was also shared within the groups among each other. In 2014, we've had three food councils who were using components of the manual as a test to see whether the manual is instructive and helpful enough. It has been exciting to see how the manual has been utilized. So far, we have received favorable responses from most of the individuals who have given it a try. We

certainly do not expect it to be the exclusive “play book” that organizations will follow to the letter. Instead, we are hopeful of the fact that it will showcase some of the best practices and serve as a guide. We have seen groups forming, for instance, one in Prince William County entitled, “The Greater Prince William County Food Council.” What I’m excited about is that they follow the model of bringing stakeholders together from the region. It included government officials, social services, aging, the SNAP outreach folks, the catholic dioceses, and also the local food pantries that represented us from the food banks. All of these people came together and said, “Okay, we want to do this, we want to work collaboratively, we want to cooperate, we do not want to compete against one another.” And they said, “We are going to form a food council, we’re going to identify key objective areas.”

Their website is now up. They have received some funding. Apart from creating a website they have also carried out a community assessment survey within the community to better understand the available resources in the community with the intention of creating a directory that could be accessed by all citizens within the county who are struggling with hunger issues. It is pretty exciting to think that it was something that was piecemealed before. Previously, maybe a particular organization could have helped directly or know one or two other organizations that could have helped instead. But now, it is not second guessing. You hope if you talk to the right person they might know more than the last person. I have helped in putting together an online directory that can be easily searched by citizens of Prince William County to help identify *all* the hunger resources

within their community. That is really exciting. That group has also received free legal help to actually attain their 501(c)(3) status. Now they can apply for grants and work with donors. They are an official entity. They do have a very solid board of directors that includes a range of officials and grassroots level citizen leaders from within the community that help lead and guide that group. So that's been a real joy to see.

With the goal in mind of creating a Virginia-specific food council startup manual we faced lots of challenges. The consultant not only conducted one-on-one personal phone interviews, but also did a literature review. Without being discouraging, I would say that the consultant had a hard time finding substantive and easily applicable information about the ways to start a food council. We realized that to prevent duplicating the effort, there is a need to create a resource that could be utilized at least in Virginia. That is how we began. The consultant would share their findings with us. We would review that and discuss certain aspects we felt like should be further probed to get more information, especially from those that were leading these types of food council in rural localities versus urban environments.

The hardest part is to bring multiple groups together to unify around a set number of goals. I hear this often within the food network where many groups have so many different focus areas. One may be focusing on local foods and another on nutritious foods. Those oftentimes are very interconnected and related and can be overlapped. You can get nutritious food that is not local. But if you have these different players in the room along with the SNAP folks and school-lunch-type

individuals who are focused on youth, or an organization who is focused on meals for homebound seniors, it can be very challenging to get everyone unified and together on a specific two or three objectives for the year. Many of these organizations have siloed into very specific key objectives and have very limited resources. Asking them to join onto a consortium or a council, and spend some of their time to benefit others and at the same time not to be entirely focused on the area that they're used to focusing, can be challenging.

Hence, one of the key challenges of food councils with different groups all representing different areas and aspects of hunger, is the facilitation piece. There should be ways to bring multiple groups on board, recognizing that we all have a similar shared goal, but ensuring that the overlapping and shared work plays into the strengths of the different players and also be inclusive so that organizations can buy in. One should realize and recognize the fact that the work of the council will either directly or indirectly improve the aspects of hunger that they may be funded to take on, and that they are responsible in many cases to donors for their accomplishments. That is really a key issue.

Having a key point person or point organization who is committed is critical. When dealing with community work and when we think about recruiting volunteers and getting people involved, oftentimes there is a sense that if you get the right volunteers there and everybody gets together, good things will happen. It is not always the case. You need someone leading the project or leading the fledgling council for the first 12 months who says, "Hey, we're going to give this our best shot.

We don't know exactly what it's going to look like." They should be committed to communicate regularly with the interested stakeholders, hold regular meetings that are organized, and have a clear agenda by potentially using the outline or the approach that our manual suggests. That is great, but regardless, they should ensure that there is a way to hear from all parties about their work and to facilitate shared ideas or missional components in order to identify clear objectives to outline what the council would be tackling. We saw, for instance, "Feed More" in Richmond, the local food bank and the CEO Doug Pick, was willing to have one person serve from his staff as the key coordinator for RVA food collaborative. They were able to bring multiple organizations together with that coordinator person and a small team of key advisors from the start, who could outline meeting objectives, make agendas, and serve as facilitators to walk these groups through the process of identifying key objectives.

Regardless of what any of us are doing and whatever field that we are in, we should look to ensure that we are living our lives with a purpose and with a meaning. It is helpful when we know that we are trying to make a difference in others' lives, but we face challenges or things don't seem to be working quite as quickly as we had hoped. This kind of situation is quite obvious in my opinion when we are dealing with hunger issues. It is easy to see the potential tangible benefits that we can make if we work together. So choosing a project that you truly believe in and see potential in is going to be very inspiring and helpful. It also helps get others on board. I would say that I've seen the use of sharing one's story or sharing the stories of others, with permission of course, showcasing

the needs that are out there as explicitly as possible. It is a truthful way to generate interest and help from others.

At the initial stakeholder meetings when we were pulling together groups within a community, I would take some of the learning from some of the councils that we've seen who have put forward areas of focus to, in a way, guide the thinking of the community representatives who are there. Right from the start I think it is helpful to listen to the different issues. Whether it's regarding advocacy work or access to nutritional food options or key issues of transportation in a community, it helps to bring some focus in the mind of the participants.

I wouldn't want to overshadow or in some way prohibit others from bringing topics to the meetings, but I found that it can be very helpful to have done some pre-work and pre-assessment prior to the formation of the council to say, "Hey, these are some of the key issues that seem to be hampering work here locally in Community A." It can help to seek agreements from the stakeholders present there in order to move forward in those directions or to focus from a group of three to five down to a group of one to two. But if the meeting begins with a sense of, "Hey, let's go around the room and everybody share what's the top thing," the meetings can become derailed by one person who might only showcase his/her pet project by being affixed to that and championing the fact that his/her project idea is the entire solution to the problem. Facilitation is the key and is very necessary. It is important to have a leader or a leader organization with a skilled facilitator to help combat those situations where one person is dominating the conversation and attempting to take over the council.

Instead the facilitator will make sure that everyone's voice is heard and everyone is working together towards a focused work project and trying to find common themes and ideas. That is very critical. I know that we have not even, to this date, identified the perfect way of doing that, but a skilled facilitator and leader is really a key component.

I felt that the knowledge of the community is very critical especially when we were assessing the critical needs here in Wytheville, Chesapeake, or in Woodbridge. Each of those communities is so different that it is important to have individuals on the ground whether they be volunteer community members or directors of the social service agency present locally. Individuals should be able to speak to the people in the community to identify their true needs. They should pull individuals and resources together to tackle those needs. Needs identified should be put on the list of agendas.

Issue of hunger cannot be solved overnight, but we must recognize that every small bit counts and that we are going to work forward and progress incrementally. Everyone can make a difference. Certainly there are ways like food drives to attack the immediate hunger needs. Focusing on some of the systemic issues for instance, access to transportation or access to nutritional options which are often limited for seniors or those who have limited means might be impactful in the long run. I would encourage individuals who are considering fighting against hunger by committing to project work to drive down those systemic challenges and barriers. They should work to find solutions to those issues to make a difference in the lives of many people instead of working for a

one-time food drive which, again, is needed. I don't want to in any way diminish the need for helping people immediately who have challenges with food on the table today and tomorrow. But I feel it is most helpful whenever we are able to move the ball forward by addressing the systemic barriers.

I would like for AARP to continue being a catalyst. It should not only broaden and increase the resources in addition to this manual for organizing food councils, but also pull in resources from other states to be able to showcase some of the good work of non-profits, community localities, and municipalities across the nation. AARP should be bringing information to the state of Virginia to highlight the good work that is being done by our members through our publications and our website to encourage AARP members to get involved in their communities. As I mentioned earlier, there are more than one million talented and skilled AARP members in Virginia who are already working and will work to help with emergency hunger needs in our state. They should also be a part of the boards and commissions and run for offices and write letters to the editor to advocate on behalf of Virginia's neediest families in order to improve access, awareness, and education around making wise food choices across our state.

Our hope, and what we have seen, is that when councils are functioning well and can experience and showcase some improvements in the community, that help build momentum and get others involved, there is a sense of, "Hey, if we work together and I help you this time, you'll help me next time, and we'll be more impactful because we worked together on that." I would like to see

a continual growing of food councils across Virginia. As awareness increases, grassroots individuals and communities and non-profits and organizations say, "We need to work together. We need to start up food council type groups that can tackle the challenges and involve others more." My hope is that if I were to say a broad, big audacious goal, it would be to have a food council in every county of Virginia that is operating functionally and empowering volunteerism across our state.