Introduction to Human Services Administration
Program Transcript

NARRATOR: What factors affect human service administrators, and what challenges do they face when providing help to those in need? In this video, you will hear from a human service administrator in Kalamazoo, Michigan about every day issues that impact the programs and services he provides to the community. As you listen to his account, think about his responsive and flexible nature as he attempts to meet growing community needs.

BOB RANDELS: When you think about food, we become family around food-- around Thanksgiving, and holiday meals, or even events after funerals, where the family gathers. We become friends and lovers around food. It's Weber grills and tailgates and picnics-- that food is so organically connected to the notion of community, that if there are people in our community that don't have enough food, the very notion of community is threatened. We're one of 200 Feeding America Food Banks throughout the country, so it's really our job to procure as much food as possible, professionally bank it, warehouse it, distribute it to an ever-growing number of people that are in need in these tough times that we're living in.

Food banking really got its start at the recession of the early '80s. There, I think, we saw the first shaking of the foundations of the economy that's subsequently been borne upon us. We had a great boon after World War II in terms of middle class, good jobs in factories, and manufacturing. We had very little global competition to speak of, in terms of the economy and a thriving manufacturing world. And then really at the early '80s was when we saw the first beginnings of factories starting to close down for the first time, people losing their jobs for the first time-- here in Kalamazoo and in South Central Michigan.

And for the first time, the word homelessness popped up in the lexicon since the Depression. People were lining up to get food. There was this grand paradox of people in need, people that are jobless, becoming homeless, losing their sense of certitude and security about how the are going to live their lives-- and yet you had this paradox of abundance, of the government throwing surplus cheese in the ocean. So it was from that kind of context-- we've got a lot of food in this country. We have a great agricultural, we have a great food industry, there's a lot of product that's available, and yet there's the paradox of people in need of food. So food banking really was a logistical way to set up a distribution system that would capture those unsellables, get it warehoused, and get them out to people in need.

I think being a human service professional is a really dynamic vocation. I think it ties you to all the parts that are good about the profit making business world that we live in, but it also gives you a sense to dig a little deeper, and take into account others, and the importance of others, and making a society a better

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place for everybody to live. I came from Union Theological Seminary-- had a Divinity degree, was a Methodist minister.

I had just gotten a Master's of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and we actually moved out here with a group of people from the East Coast-- from Harvard and Union and formed a community, just to experiment with the concepts of voluntary simplicity and living in community. At that point, we ran a house of shelter for women. And the language at that point was not domestic violence but battered women, so we were one of the first houses of hospitality to take in people that had suffered domestic violence. And one of the ways that we fed our people-- we had heard from other people that were running these kind of communities, that there was a lot of waste at the local grocery store dumpsters. So, frankly, we had a rotation where we would check out the dumpsters, and find product, and glean it, as well as getting donations. But this was before the days of food banking. So the community had moved on to different things, and the job posting happened here about setting up an Executive Director to deal with food surplus and feeding people. And I had a couple of friends just call me up and say, "Hey, you'd be great for that job." So I applied.

So I've always been interested in social justice issues. I've always been interested in a vocation that is more than just a paycheck that has something after you're done with that, that you feel like you've accomplished something, made life easier or better for other people. I remember when we first started out-- and I was just in an office cube, we had no warehouse, we had no food, and I'm trying to sell this idea of food banking-- that I was pretty convinced that the idea was a good idea and it was going to work, but we needed to show that it could. And I recall getting a lot of "No's," right up front-- to the point where even though you were convinced about the validity of the food bank concept, that you almost had to take self-esteem pills through the process.

But I remember sitting across the table from a plant manager of a big manufacturer. And at some point, in terms of my own sense of being able to deliver, was I came to this understanding that everybody has a longing to want to do good. Everybody has a longing to care for others. And mostly what I'm doing by sitting across the table is offering that invitation for that longing to get tapped. I'm not naive to the notion that human beings can often behave in really terrible ways and selfish ways, but I also have this notion that they also have a hungering and a longing to want to do the opposite. They want to do good. I think that's why people come here and volunteer. I think that's why food companies give us product. I think that's why agencies want to get that food and give it to people. People have a basic longing and hunger to want to care for others.

The motto of distribution or philanthropy that the Feeding America Food Banks use is somewhat similar to the United Way concept-- that it's better to have one agency out there soliciting on behalf of all, rather than 10, 12 good nonprofits knocking on the same doors, asking for resources. So in the food banking world,

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we solicit food from manufacturers, and retailers, and community grassroots-type workplace collections, professionally store it here, and then redistribute it out to a network of over 300 charities-- whether those charities are church pantries, or day care centers, or soup kitchens, or domestic violence shelters, or senior feeding programs.

Food comes to us through our networking relationship with Feeding America, who has a relationship with the major food manufacturers and retailers in this country. So probably about 20% of that comes through our relationship with the network. We have a great state association, so we work collectively here in the state of Michigan to work with Michigan growers, and a good significant supply of our inventories comes from our relationship with Michigan agriculture. There's an interface on the public side, through the farm bill, and through USDA. We get a good portion of product that comes from programs run by USDA-- surplus commodities that are available. On the local side, we're always interfacing with smaller entities, smaller stores and restaurants. But also, we get a good 20% of our product from collections. We try to blend our resources from national, state, and local. And we're seeing an ever-growing generosity and people stepping up the plate to want to help out. That's grown. Our demand is way up-- about 27%, but to date our sources of supply have been keeping pace.

And then there are times that we just need to go out and buy product. So there's a need to collect money, and we can kind of purchase product on a wholesale basis. Those items that we know our agencies need-- proteins, and fruits and vegetables, and dairy products, that aren't always donated to us in a steady supply. So there is a need to garner resources.

We're kind of like the United Way of food, if you will. It's our job. And the currency that we're really collecting is the currency of pounds of food. Ultimately, once that food leaves this distribution center-- this wholesaling type operation, if you will-- it goes to the front lines. It goes to that church pantry that has neighbors in a rural area, or a low-income area of the city that have people that have lost their jobs, have foreclosed, had a health situation that's brought them to need some food just to get through the weekend, or get through the end of the month.

With the advent of the store rescue program, with Walmart coming on nationwide as just a great partner-- but these are example of product-- there's chicken that we're getting in through our store rescue product with Walmart and Kroger as well. And there are bins of that product available in the warehouse. Great support from Michigan growers, these are apples from surpluses that we're getting in. So we're seeing great produce coming in from Michigan.

Here in Battle Creek-- we're in South Central Michigan, Southwest Michigan-- we're lucky in Kalamazoo County to have the cereal industry in Battle Creek. And some product comes in from Post, and they serve on our board. Executives from Post Cereal will be on our board. Executives from Ralston will be on our board.

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And Kellogg is a great partner. So we're lucky to be a food bank that gets a lot of cereal. And again, cereal is one of those items that everybody can use-- a pantry, a senior feeding program, we put it in our after school packs. So cereal is just like gold in the world of food banking, and we're fortunate to have the great generosity of our three cereal companies here in Battle Creek that make sure that our friends at Loaves and Fishes and all of our 300 charities have a pretty steady supply of cereal all the time.

Here in the Midwest, or what some people would call the Rust Belt-- again, we've talked about this, but-- we had factories that were thriving, and people had good middle class lives coming out of that from the early '80s. And we've seen a general decline in those sorts of good jobs. So in Kalamazoo, and generally in Michigan, all of these terrible economic shakings of the foundation are even worse here. We've got high levels of joblessness and unemployment that I think are chronic. And there aren't any easy solutions about what the next new job's going to be for families. So we're suffering all over this country right now, in terms of shifts that have happened, but specifically here in Kalamazoo, our rates of poverty, our childhood hunger numbers, are off the map. Our working poor numbers are off the map. We simply haven't found-- the new economy has not come into our area as it's begun to sprung out elsewhere, say in the South or other parts of the country. So we're facing some serious challenges that aren't temporary. They're prolonged and are going to be around for a good four or five years that make our work even more difficult than, say, other communities in the country.

We do significant research in terms of discerning what the numbers are, and what's the profile of people that are showing up for food. 34% of the people that are in need are children. A good 13 to 14% are senior citizens. So we have these two ends of the age spectrum, children and senior citizens-- being the most fragile, the most commonly found to be in need-- not being able to make ends meet. We're seeing an ever-rising number of working poor, people that actually are working at this job, or two jobs-- find themselves not being able to have enough food at some period of time, and relying on these food programs, these front-line pantries, and we supply those products to those programs. We're finding people showing up at food sites that never imagined that they would ever be in need of a bag of food. We're finding people that are making tough choices between food or utilities; food or medicine; food or rent. So thanks to the lifeline funds, and the really kind of prophetic active role that the community foundation United Way took just to deal with this tsunami of need that came our way, we knew that hunger was a problem. And it had grown dramatically in a very quick period of time, that we needed to step up and increase our after school programs for children. We needed to increase our procurement efforts to get more food for an ever-growing number of people in need, to set up more mobile food banks and fresh food initiatives, just to deal with the onrush of need that we have.

DENNIS: We'll keep a little track in between them.

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FEMAL SPEAKER: Dennis is here today. He's with the Third Reform Church, and he's picking up after school packs for three buildings-- schools over in the Kalamazoo/Marcellus area. And the packs will be distributed to kids that participate in the after school programs. The volunteers are actually assembling these after school packs that get distributed through the school programs. And as soon as those packs get assembled today, they will be leaving out of here next week. So we have a great demand for the after school packs, and they move out of here as quickly as they get packed up by our volunteers.

BOB RANDELS: To be an agency of the food bank, you have to be a 501(c)(3), you have to agree to sign liability releases protecting donors that would give to us, you have to agree to store your product in a safe and up to code, in terms of safe housekeeping, standards. You have to agree to be monitored by us, our agency relations department, to make sure that product is going to needy people, that it's not being put back into secondary markets, that it's being distributed according to good stewardship. Then once you've become an agency of the food bank, our food list is up on our web. Our agencies have a passcode-protected way to order what they need. They set up an appointment time; they come to the food bank, and pick up their food. We do a lot of shipping ourselves, where our trucks will go to a given spot in the county. And our agencies will meet us there. So it's a pretty efficient system, and it's tied to the best practices of the food industry. And we regard what we're doing as part of the food industry.

FEMALE SPEAKER: We're from the Sonoma United Methodist Church, most of us. And we've been working for the food bank for about over 20 years. We're putting together backpacks for school children, for the weekend when they don't have any food. It's just something that our church likes to do. We volunteer wherever we can. And it just gives you a good feeling to know that you're helping someone else less fortunate than we are.

BOB RANDELS: So one of our programs is a pretty simple program of after school packs. Lifeline funds have really helped us get that program up and running and expanded over the Kalamazoo area. But just to work with local school teachers, identifying kids that may be at risk, putting together a simple pack of kid friendly food, yet nutritious food, giving the child a backpack that's pretty generic, doesn't say I'm hungry or has a logo on it-- but giving them a bag of food, putting it in that backpack at the end of the week, so they can take it home at the weekend, bring the backpack back, get another backpack and get food-- pretty basic staples for kids to take home after school on the weekends to get them through the weekends. Because we know that these numbers are real high in terms of these ever-growing instances of kids just simply not getting enough food.

The other big change that's happened since I've been around, since 1983, is that I remember at times when I'd get a call from a local potato farmer, and he says he's got six or eight pallets of potatoes. And there was almost a point when I'd

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go, "What am I going to do with that? I don't have the distribution system. Our pantries don't have refrigeration." They're only open Monday and Wednesday per week, or the systems weren't really ready to accommodate fresh produce. Thanks to the lifeline funds, we have doubled our, what we call, mobile food banks-- where our trucks go into neighborhoods with all this great produce and we have volunteers there to set it up and people are there that are in need to get this incredible, good healthy food. To the point where, of the 10 million pounds of food that we're going to end up distributing, over 20%, maybe even close to 25% of all we distribute now is fresh produce. And that involves a whole other form of distribution, in terms of our trucks actually going into neighborhoods. But with the help of the lifeline funds, with the good work of Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes, our sister partner, we have been expanding that kind of fresh food initiative distributions into poverty neighborhoods.

Kalamazoo has this great sense of community, this great sense of wanting to care, wanting to make the community better, not just for a few but for all. And the lifeline funds are just a perfect example of stepping up, getting a sense of the crisis that we're in, and wanting to deal with just very basic issues that come when you're facing such serious problems. So we're thankful for that kind of sense of commitment, and sense of realizing that there's serious problems, and we're going to have to address them as a community.

Our distribution of produces and perishables is up about 20, 25%. So we're seeing some great items come in. Apples, dairy products, eggs-- a great supply thanks to the Walmart, Sam's Club partnership. We have a steady supply of eggs that get rescued three days a week now, from-- I think we have 10 stores that we're picking up from, throughout eighty counties. General Mills has been a great donor of yogurt for us. And biscuits, whatever is in a cooler is what we have. And then Prius Prairie Farms is a local dairy manufacturer that we get great product from. So we have a nice blend, really good food. And actually we're at a point where we need more cold storage-- in terms of the infrastructure, and keeping the system going into the future, we're looking at adding on to our cooler space just to accommodate the great onrush of produce that we're seeing coming in, being donated.

I go to these food lines where we have people lined up. They may be there three hours before our truck shows up with fresh produce, with laundry baskets-- 100, 150 people. And I've had a lot of people come into my office over the years-- superintendents of schools, or vice presidents of Fortune 500 food companies. And I'll start to tell them all the statistics about who's hungry. And I don't know how many times over the years I've been stopped mid-sentence by these very successful people, and they say, "Bob you don't need to tell me about hunger. I grew up hungry."

When I look at those people in lines nowadays, or at an after school pack-- and I like to wonder and think that, "Which one of those kids that I'm seeing getting an

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after school pack will one day be a Fortune 500 Vice President because of the mercies that were bestowed with the handing out of that pack." So we're not just about the business of giving food to satisfy people's physical needs. It's a real clear sense that when we give out food, we're giving out hope.

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