

Faces on Capitol Square: Lisa Hamler-Fugitt Reflects on Foodbanks Career, Says Ohio Must Address 'Aging Problem'

Capitol Square is devoid of one of its most visible lobbyists -- for a while, at least.

The decision to step down from her role leading the Ohio Association of Foodbanks (OAF) was "bittersweet," Lisa Hamler-Fugitt told *Hannah News* during a wide-ranging interview. (See *The Hannah Report*, 7/12/23.)

"One of the reasons that I'm leaving now, is I have elderly parents. Certainly, what I've seen both professionally and personally, is that we -- the collective 'we,' the citizens of the state of Ohio as well as all of America -- we have an aging problem. We have no support systems in place whatsoever for dealing with aging parents and relatives," she said.

"Right now, what I'm personally dealing with is a father, who is the primary caregiver of my mother, who has dementia," Hamler-Fugitt continued. "He got COVID in March of 2020, and he has been struggling since that time with just everything -- heart, kidneys. He is just holding on right now and trying to live independently. So I'm going to be spending a lot of time doing elder caregiving."

Hamler-Fugitt said she may return to Capitol Square soon after her retirement, but in a different capacity.

"You might see me again, maybe in a red coat, advocating on behalf of senior issues. I'm dealing with it right now, and there is a huge imbalance in our state in how we spend dollars taking care of our elderly," she said.

"I see it professionally, because the fastest growing segment of the people who are standing in our food lines are 60-plus, and I'm alarmed by the number that we're seeing over the age of 80. These are folks who have outlived all their resources because of inflation and the cost of living," Hamler-Fugitt continued. "Once the seniors join the food lines, the chances that they leave that food line are pretty slim. And they're going to leave in one of two ways -- they're going to go into a nursing home because they can't maintain their independence any longer, or they're going to pass away. We see them really as the canaries in the coal mine."

She said the state will need to implement some "major public policy shifts" or "we're going to be spending more and more on the health care side in the Medicaid program under dual eligibles."

Hamler-Fugitt said she will also take time to relax during retirement, noting she likes gardening and Formula One racing.

“In another lifetime, when I was much younger, I did regional race promotion activities for Quaker State when they ran the Porsche team,” she said. “I bought a 1972 MGB last year. I will not race it, but I probably will putt around at vintage events.”

Reflecting on her career, Hamler-Fugitt said she has worked on Capitol Square for 15 budget cycles.

“I have fond memories of before term limits,” she said. “I saw a lot more bipartisan efforts -- generally more respect member to member, but also a willingness to sit down and have a conversation with people who you didn’t agree with.”

Hamler-Fugitt discussed her experience with former Rep. Bob Netzley, an “arch-conservative” Miami County Republican who passed away in 2010. (See *The Hannah Report*, 7/29/10.) As chair of the welfare oversight committee, Netzley arranged a number of visits to counties to observe their practices after welfare reform passed, she said.

“I will never forget standing in Meigs County with him. Some young women had come in -- I don’t remember if they were on cash assistance or what -- but they had been brought in to talk about their experiences. Their teeth were completely rotten,” she said. “I’ll never forget this. He said, ‘My God, how are these women ever going to get hired?’ Well come to find out there were no dentists -- this was before Medicaid paid for dentistry or anything like this. But he saw that as a basic human right, a quality of life issue that is going to impair them forever, OK? And he was ultra conservative, but saw that the role of government had a real role to play in improving people’s lives.”

At the end of his legislative career, Netzley gave her a draft bill.

“It was the first family planning bill that he had introduced, which would give families access to birth control. Isn’t that something?” Hamler-Fugitt said. “When we talk about these debates now -- about access to health care and reproductive rights, he was somebody who was completely ahead of his time. And this bill ... this was way before computers. Somebody had typed that bill out. It was bound on blue construction paper with multiple copies. It’s the way they had done legislation in the past. And he said, ‘I’m packing up everything. We’ll send it to the archives.’ I think they had a museum or something for him in Miami County. And he gave me that bill, and I’ll never forget it. He said, ‘Most of the time, we never much agreed on anything, but on this one, I’m with you on that.’ That’s to say, here is someone who can be politically polar opposites, but can have respect for one another and really see that what they do is planting the seeds for the future.”

She said those kinds of experiences are harder to come by under term limits.

“It’s just rinse and repeat, and do it all again. Whether it’s copy, paste and legislate -- there’s so much outside influence now that comes in from national organizations that are trying to drive their own agendas. This isn’t stuff that is being generated because it’s a need for Ohioans by Ohioans, but it’s influenced by national organizations, and we see that a lot. Believe me, I see it

more and more, and it seems to be accelerating now. What gets introduced in Indiana pops here, pops somewhere else, and it's verbatim. It's the same stuff," she said.

Hamler-Fugitt said she would like to see a constitutional amendment proposed to address term limits.

"It's been a detriment. I believe that the residents of the state of Ohio have made a huge mistake, and I think that has contributed some to the gerrymandering," she said. "There's no institutional memory here. And now, with staff ... because these positions are not competitive, it's very hard to be able to work there and pay off your college loans and start a family. Who's left? Well, who is left are a lot of people who make a living off of influencing legislation through lobbyists."

Aside from eliminating term limits, Hamler-Fugitt said the legislative process could be improved if more lawmakers visited different communities to better understand problems.

"I would love to see more special committee where members ... literally go out into the communities and see how these programs [work] -- I call it 'policy hits the pavement.' How does this policy impact people? How do these programs impact people? That should be part of the legislative process," she said. "Why do we sit over there and have hearings? It precludes a lot of people from being involved. ... If you've got 100 people that come out to testify and you're providing one or two days' worth of public testimony and limiting people to no more than three minutes, how much are you really going to learn? You're not going to read all that submitted testimony, right?"

Reflecting on the pandemic, Hamler-Fugitt said Ohio was completely unprepared for a disaster of that nature, but applauded Gov. Mike DeWine for quickly mobilizing the Ohio National Guard to help with food distribution. Looking forward, she said she's particularly concerned about the effect climate change will have on the food system.

"Having been doing this for as long as I have -- we're having to purchase more and more food because foodbanks came about out of the 70s, and we just lived on the dark side of the food industry, meaning overproduction. Foods that became close to code date that couldn't be sold anymore, we would pick those up from grocery stores or retailers or wholesalers. We've had to spend, now, more and more money buying more and more food. The food that we need that has normally been donated isn't there anymore. And the cost of food is skyrocketing. It's pretty much unsustainable at this point. ... Climate change is real, and we as Americans have basically taken for granted that we have a pretty available, affordable food system that isn't probably going to be that way for much longer," she said.

Hamler-Fugitt said Medicaid expansion has been a lifesaver for many individuals across the state, praising former Gov. John Kasich for implementing the policy despite heavy pushback from other Republicans in Ohio.

"That intervention alone has really helped people who had undiagnosed mental or physical disabilities that kept them out of the workplace. That expansion has been really key to helping them regain their health ... and be able now to work," she said. "I saw people with chronic

conditions that had become so acute that they were already life-threatening -- they were just frequent flyers in the emergency room. [With Medicaid], they were able to find a health care home, get their life stabilized. A lot of it was diabetes ... renal failure was another. I worked with a gentleman who had congestive heart failure. He was able to get a heart transplant. He was a single dad. A lot of people don't realize that there were a lot of lives saved, and there are to this day, because of Medicaid expansion."

Hamler-Fugitt said many legislators have been supportive of foodbanks and generous with their time and money over the years, including former House Speakers Ryan Smith (R-Bidwell), Larry Householder (R-Glenford) and Bob Cupp (R-Lima).

She also pointed to Rep. Jay Edwards (R-Nelsonville) as a lawmaker who is particularly supportive of foodbanks.

"He buys up livestock from all of the 4-H kids in the fairs, and delivered a huge amount of meat ... to the Second Harvest Foodbank of Southeastern Ohio," Hamler-Fugitt said.

She said Democrats and Republicans from all over the state have been generous and supportive of foodbanks over the years.

"I'm just giving you a handful. There are lots, but they don't talk about it. Why they don't talk about it, I don't know. But that tells you the character of people," Hamler-Fugitt said.

Hamler-Fugitt recalled her experience with former House Finance Committee Chair Rep. Chuck Calvert (R-Medina), who recently passed away (see *The Hannah Report*, 8/11/23).

"He didn't miss an opportunity to bust my chops every time I testified," she said.

"I got to know this woman by the name of Sandy Calvert. We're expanding some programs in the area, and lo and behold, I walk into that pantry and there's Chairman Calvert after he was term-limited," Hamler-Fugitt said, noting she didn't previously make the connection that Sandy Calvert was married to Chuck Calvert.

"He said to me, 'You know, you would come before the committee and testify, and I really never got it. I get it now,'" Hamler-Fugitt recalled Chuck Calvert saying. "He said, 'I work in the food line because Sandy said I need to come here -- I can't be retired. I need to come here and do something, and really need to see the whole of our community. I'm handing out food, and I see this guy, and I know him. I used to golf with him. I used to have drinks with him at the country club. Now he's standing in the food line. It can happen to any of us, and there but for the grace of God go I.'"

Hamler-Fugitt said approximately one out of three Ohioans already qualify for emergency food.

"Whether you want to admit it or not, it's six doors down and it looks a whole lot like you and me," she said.

She added that individuals who work in the Statehouse sometimes qualify for food assistance.

“Through the years, some of the best access I think that I’ve ever gotten to members that didn’t want to meet with me ... was because staff who were standing in the food pantry lines to feed their families were willing to put me on the schedule. They would never admit it to their bosses, but they did,” Hamler-Fugitt said.

Hamler-Fugitt also discussed the importance of all children receiving free meals in schools, saying it’s clear that students perform better academically when they are well fed.

“Let’s look at all the other industrialized countries that are kicking our asses competitively. What do their school systems have that we don’t? Oh, all the kids start the day with eating!” she said. “It doesn’t matter what zip code they come from. We’re going to give them breakfast, we’re going to give them lunch and we’re going to get to then teach them about nutrition ... because we’re preparing meals communally. And then, we’re going to make sure that they can do their homework because we’re going to give them a snack in the afternoon. Kids are growing, they’re learning -- it’s not just their body function, but it’s their brain function too.”

Asked why the federal or state governments do not fund meals for all students in K-12 schools, Hamler-Fugitt said, “Because somebody might get a goddamn free lunch whose families don’t ‘deserve’ it. Isn’t that amazing that we don’t hold that same criteria to everything else, including tax cuts? Because we lack the political will.”

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