



Episode 10: Our 2022 crystal ball for anti-hunger advocacy

Audio Transcript

Sarah K. 00:00:25 Welcome back to Just a Bite and Happy New Year. I think for many of us, the new year symbolizes a fresh start where we reassess our goals and plan for the year ahead. So that's exactly what we're doing here at the association. So we wanted to talk about what we'll be working on this year for our first episode of 2022, both the state legislature and Congress will be back in session this month and they both have quite a bit on their agendas for the next couple of months. Although it isn't a state budget year, there's still plenty of work to do on the state level. Joree, what are some things happening within next couple of months?

Joree N. 00:01:08 Yeah. Thanks Sarah. Welcome back to Just a Bite everybody. And to 2022, well, you know, the next couple months feel as unpredictable in many ways as the last couple of years have felt for so many of us, I think, first off. So we have definitely learned more than ever to be versatile and prepared to be responsive. Um, so I think that goes without saying that there may be some unknowns. I do know that from the perspective of just serving on the ground and responding to the needs of our communities, we're definitely expecting and experiencing higher demand for help in the short term with the, um, at least for now expiration of the expanded child tax credit payments, as well as just the pressure that this current extreme COVID surge is having on workers and families, um, and people who are gonna lose income because of illness because of isolation and the families as well that are experiencing, um, in access to school, traditional school buildings in the school meals that come with that, all of those things that have been putting pressure on household budgets and their access to food and basic needs are rising up again to the forefront.

Joree N. 00:02:38 So, you know, we're staying super focused on making sure that our network is ready from day to day and week to week to respond. Um, but you know, from a policy perspective, we're absolutely looking at what levers we have to help us make sure not only in the next couple of months, but in the months and years to come, that we're resilient, that we're prepared, that we have the infrastructure and the stability and our network necessary to be here for Ohio. And so one really key thing that we're talking a lot about, and we're going to keep talking about are the federal American Rescue Plan Act funds. So, you know, our congressional delegation and Congress as a whole, um, passed the American Rescue Plan Act, which included some state flexible funds, which are designed to allow states to respond to direct impacts of the pandemic and to prepare states for future resiliency and response to current and future pandemics and endemics and crises.

Joree N. 00:03:50 So we're looking at the American Rescue Plan Act, flexible funds as a real opportunity for our basic needs infrastructure to maintain and build a better, more holistic and reliable network that is accessible for every Ohioan. And we've been working hard for two years to get as close to that vision as we can for the nearly 1 million people we serve every month. So what we really need is additional support to build out the physical spaces, where we store the food, the physical trucking that we need to distribute that food, the other equipment that we use to move that food from place to place and store it safely, as well as the people and the people power that we need

to respond to the greater workforce need and to train the workforce of the future. So we're seeking \$183 million from the American Rescue Plan Act funding that's available to the state to use in a flexible way.

Joree N. 00:05:10 And there's more than \$3 billion currently still unallocated in those state flexible dollars. So there's definitely, um, a good chunk of change to go around, to address some of the critical needs that are facing our communities as we try to expand and then build back from this crisis, you know, we're also going to be following a lot of the other funding that was included in the American Rescue Plan Act. For example, there were some funds included to help modernize programs like SNAP and WIC, and to help our state agencies make those programs work the best they can, those sort of front door systems to those federal nutrition, safety net programs. So when we're also following those levers really closely, and we're also part of the, um, Advocates for Ohio's Future, um, committee that's following the public health emergency and the implications that the expiration, the eventual expiration of that public health emergency will have on nutrition programs, on anti-poverty programs, on household and family stability, you know, looking for ways to make good flexibilities permanent, to prepare our networks and the people we serve for the expiration of some of those flexibilities to anticipate how they may impact people day to day, and to respond when inevitably there are some major benefits on the way as the public health emergency does transition.

Joree N. 00:06:47 Now we don't have an end date yet to that public health emergency declaration as everyone is well aware right now in January, 2022 here in Ohio, especially we are in the midst of what's now historically the largest search in COVID cases. Um, we have an extremely high rate of hospitalizations and deaths still from this pandemic. So, um, we are by no means out of the public health emergency woods, but we are deeply involved in making sure we're prepared for that. So those are some of the things right now going on at the state level. I'm curious, Sarah, if you wouldn't mind sharing what's on the horizon at the federal level.

Sarah K. 00:07:26 Sure. There are also a few things that we are focused on on the federal level. There is a possibility for the Child Nutrition Reauthorization process to happen early this year before Congress begins Farm Bill discussion. And of course we will urge our delegation to take up our priorities. If that's the case, Child Nutrition Reauthorization is a process where Congress revisits some of the federal child nutrition programs that we have improved them as well as, um, appropriate additional funds for those programs. So we're really hopeful that that process will start up this year. Um, we also are hopeful that Congress will address some of our main priorities for child nutrition in that process, including making the summer EBT program permanent, permanently expanding access for summer meals and maintaining some of the flexibilities that the pandemic provided for these programs. These priorities may seem familiar to you.

Sarah K. 00:08:40 Um, a lot of these priorities were included in Build Back Better, um, and we're supportive of. Of course Build Back Better is still in flux. And we're hopeful that that will get across the finish line. And we'll be doing a lot of advocacy around that, but of course, Child Nutrition Reauthorization as a process that has been happening and on a bipartisan basis. And so we'll make sure to follow both of those. We're also really focusing on improving SNAP on the federal level. And that's mainly through the Farm Bill, which is another process that happens every few years where both parties in Congress, farming advocacy groups, as well as anti hunger advocates all come together to make sure that priorities are being met for both of those groups and improving both SNAP and addressing farmers' needs. Um, our priorities on that include college student hunger, making sure that college students are eligible, continue to be eligible for SNAP, um, protecting and improving the Thrifty Food Plan, which is what SNAP benefit levels are based on as well as expanding

access to SNAP. So Joree, I know that we just celebrated the start of 2022, but what are some things that we'll be working on throughout the year in preparation for 2023?

Joree N. 00:10:16 Yeah, we never, we never are too far out from the next thing. And that's how you have to think as advocates. And we certainly, you know, just reflecting a little bit, um, as we kick off this new calendar year, we've really, um, just by default had to in many ways be fairly responsive and less proactive, reactionary and less visionary when we would have otherwise preferred I think over the past couple of years, because of the enormous weight that this crisis has layered on top of what was already a really significant food and economic insecurity crisis in our community. So it's refreshing and really important that we make sure that we're looking ahead toward long-term policy solutions, to the systemic problems that we know exist. And as you alluded to Sarah, one of those vehicles for addressing some of the challenges and leveraging those challenges to do better by people is the Farm Bill.

Joree N. 00:11:31 The Farm Bill is, you know, the, the legislative vehicle that carries most of our federal nutrition, safety net, not only our commodity programs, many of which the food banks are relying, but much more importantly, the supplemental nutrition assistance program and many of our child nutrition programs. So when look toward the Farm Bill, we really want to make sure that SNAP is protected, that it is strengthened and that Ohioans and Americans have that critical line of defense against hunger to count on. And that it is inclusive – that it comes into 2022 instead of being stuck in decades ago, policy minded, um, failures, frankly. So we're excited and hopeful that the Farm Bill will be an opportunity to take some of the things that we've learned about how we can implement SNAP policy better and make that permanent. And we're also of course, starting to look forward to the state budget cycle at the state level.

Joree N. 00:12:48 So Ohio operates on a biennial budget. Our most recent budget was passed and went into effect just this past July, right? So July, 2021 was the start of that biannual budget. But here we are in January '22 around fall, early winter of this year, we will be taking stock of where our network is at, what support we will need from the state of Ohio and our partners to make sure that we're meeting the nutritional needs of, um, the Ohioans that we serve and that we're supporting our agricultural community in doing so. So we know we're already looking toward what that might look like months down the road. And I think what's important for our listeners to glean from, from that sort of looking ahead is that as we build toward those large legislative vehicles that are opportunities for us to seek out support and funding and positive policy that makes nutrition more equitable and accessible across the board for everyone, we want to keep up the momentum, keep up the drum beat, keep people, centering, impacted people in our conversations about, you know, when we're talking about the pandemic and its impact on the workforce, we want to center people living on the margins, people living at, or near poverty who are bearing the brunt of this.

Joree N. 00:14:25 Um, and you know, well, beyond the COVID crisis, that's been the problem in a really long standing way. We want to make sure that we are every day, every week, every month as anti-hunger and anti-poverty advocates centering those people in our work and what they're facing and making sure that we're continuing to give them a space in our public, our public discussions at the table with stakeholders who are making decisions about policy and about funding. So that's what we're also committed to on our team as advocates is not only to work on these specific legislative vehicles, but overall making sure that we're elevating voices and that we're keeping these issues front and center, that we're making sure that they're not buried, um, you know, in the dark of night, but they're kept in the light of day.

Sarah K. 00:15:25 I think that's a really great point to end on Joree. Um, yes, we want to make sure that we're centering the folks that we're serving in, in this conversation and through these legislative actions. Thank you. Joree for giving us part of the rundown on what 2022 will look like for us.

Joree N. 00:15:47 Yeah. Let's hope beyond hope that it is better than the past couple of years. So we can do this. We can do this.

Sarah K. 00:16:03 I hope you enjoy Joree and I's conversation about, you know, what we are looking forward to in 2022, you know, with this episode airing so closely to Martin Luther King, Jr. day, and we're reflecting on his legacy. We wanted to end this episode with one of his quotes. So this was in his book, *Where Do We Go From Here, Chaos or Community*, um, published in 1967 as quote, "The time has come for us to civilize ourselves at a total direct and immediate abolition of poverty." It is a shame that that quote is from 55 years ago, and yet we are still facing the same problem. Um, and so we're really using that quote this year to center ourselves. So be sure to check out the show notes for some of the resources that we have left there, and we will talk to you soon.