



Episode 6: 30th Anniversary Reflections on Foodbanking

Audio Transcript

Sarah Kuhns 00:00:25 Hi everyone. Welcome back to Just a Bite. I had a wonderful discussion with our executive director at the Ohio Association of FoodBanks, Lisa Hamler-Fugitt and Tina Osso, the now retired founding executive director of Shared Harvest Foodbank in Fairfield, Ohio, who was also really instrumental in founding the association and formally bringing the network together. You really take a trip down memory lane in light of our 30th anniversary of the association. I'm just so honored to have had this discussion with these two women who have been, who are foundational to the success of the association and of Ohio's foodbank network. I hope you enjoy my conversation with Tina and Lisa.

Sarah Kuhns 00:01:41 Thank you both for being on the podcast today. I really am thrilled that we're able to do this, especially in light of the 30th anniversary of the association. Um, and I think we'll have a really great discussion today. So why don't we start off with, um, both of you introducing yourselves and also, why don't you tell me sort of your motivations for becoming a foodbank or an anti-hunger advocate? Give us some of that context.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:02:16 Well, thank you, um, Sarah for, uh, putting our podcast together today and, um, inviting Tina and I to talk about some of the history behind the association and kind of what motivated us. I had always worked around the foodbanks, but came to this field in a little different path. I had done, uh, advocacy, uh, for another statewide organization, uh, primarily working in the arena of child nutrition programs and outreach specifically the school lunch program. And that was a kind of a new career for me. I am a trained accountant and had come from a banking background and decided that I needed to be part of a solution. I felt that, um, corporate America was, um, didn't possess some values that, that I live by and I saw corporate profits soaring at the same time as compensation, um, of the workers that were making those profits possible.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:03:30 So I left in pursuit of another career and happened into the world of anti-hunger work and advocacy, and really, uh, what helped me through the process were leaders like Tina, uh, who I met, who had been doing this work for a really long time who helped mentor me. And I would say, um, help helped me see that that things were not always as black and white, but to listen to what those who have lived experiences and who live in, in a world of hunger and food insecurity and poverty, what they deal with every day that will help inform how we approach our work. So I was, I was lucky to get to know Tina and many of the original foodbank directors. And, and again, they were my mentors as I came into this. And, and I believe that the way that the association approaches its work today is very much the foundation of that guidance and support.

Sarah Kuhns 00:04:40 That's wonderful. Thank you. Um, Tina, why don't you introduce yourself?

Tina Osso 00:04:47 So, um, my original goals in life was to be this fantastic commercial artist. And so I went to school and got degrees and in the fine arts and, um, came to find out that Cincinnati wasn't necessarily the place to, um, expand on that kind of a dream. And so I went through a few

jobs and wound up on welfare and in need of food. Um, at that time there was welfare for single people. It was called general assistance and, um, I got \$75 a month. And at that time there were food stamp redemption centers where you would take a portion of your welfare check, go to the food stamp redemption center and quote unquote, buy your food stamps. So a \$5 got me my allotment of \$25 a month in food stamps, even in the mid seventies, that wasn't a lot. And, um, so I wound up finding out about these things called food pantries.

Tina Osso 00:06:15 And there was one at the Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church that was run by a little known non-profit called Freestore. So I went to get groceries and the food room was so disorganized. There was no rhyme or reason to go. So I offered to straighten it out and get it in some semblance of order and wound up going back every day, uh, to work the food room because it put me in touch with people who were going through the same struggle I was. And it really made me feel part of this community of people who faced all this hardship, but was still able to keep their humanity. And so after about a year of volunteering, Steve Gibbs, who was the director there, and one of the people who helped found the Ohio association was able to get a contract with the city of Cincinnati, for CDOT, which is, was the comprehensive employment and training act. And through that he raised money and hired me. And that's how my career in hunger relief started. It was as a client, which I think brought me some insight into what poverty and hunger means. Especially if you have what you think is a good education and should be able to be self supportive, but odds are, once you hit that bottom, it's so difficult to pull yourself back up, but I did and, and went on to realize that hunger relief was more than a passion. It was a mission and I'm in a humbling experience.

Sarah Kuhns 00:08:32 Yeah. I'm, I'm sure that experiencing that poverty yourself gives you a really unique outlook on what the folks that you're serving experience. You are also founding director of Shared Harvest Foodbank, right? You, how, how was that experience founding that foodbank?

Tina Osso 00:08:57 Yes. Yes. Well, you know, I am, I'm a faith filled person and I believe that something, some higher power puts you where you need to be at the time you need to be there. So, um, I had left Freestore for a variety of reasons and worked as counter waitresses at Frisch's and a variety of other low wage jobs. And I was standing on a street corner in Hamilton, Ohio waiting to cross the street. And I heard my name and I looked over and there was one of my friends from Freestore. And she was in town to meet with a group of nonprofits and government associations and churches who had heard about this foodbank thing and wanted to start on a Butler county. So Lois asked me what I was doing, and I said nothing. She said, why don't you come to this meeting? I said, cool thinking what I was going to do since I had experience and helping free store start their foodbank, that I would just help them get organized and step away, 30, almost 40 years later, I retired.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:10:25 Sarah. You know, I've thought about this because the years let alone the decades roll by. And as Tina was talking about the time of pre welfare reform, and for those of you who are young and wouldn't have a point of reference of what the 1970s were really all about it, it really was a period of time in American history. Looking back that it was really the start of a lot of what we're dealing with now, which was the beginning of offshoring of jobs. Um, those good family supporting jobs and industries where mothers and fathers followed their mothers and fathers and their grandparents, and to many of the factories that were at the center of our communities. They began closing as their jobs were being offshored, especially in manufacturing and Tina's from a manufacturing hub and in the Hamilton county area, a huge paper manufacturer, a lot of printing industries in that area. But at the same time, what started to happen is that we saw record levels of interest rates. I think some of the highest that we ever saw, uh, in our history, but also inflation

inflation record prices of consumer goods, high unemployment inflation, and, uh, probably unheard of now, but a time of rationing in modern time of rationing gas.

Tina Osso 00:12:11 You remember being in line at gas stations because there was a rationing of gas and, you know, depending on your license plate was the day you could go fuel up and you just hope that they didn't run out of gas before you're able to fuel your car.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:12:33 Yeah. And that's not that long ago, this is 1970s was modern time, but so much of the seeds that were planted in the disinvestment that began happening then, and as Tina said, you know, college graduate filled with optimism and opportunity that this is what we walked into as the workforce of the future. Um, and there are a lot of similarities to be real honest in, in kind of what we're experiencing. Now, the big difference is that foodbanking or just emergency food relief was, was totally in its infancy. As I remember the stories being told to me that they were modest efforts of, of people of faith who got together and didn't local food drives to what we've become today is a well organized nonprofits that operate as businesses with, um, solutions. I mean, we, we are solutions oriented people that have identified a problem, and we're attempting to get industry to adapt, to help us while dealing with some of their inefficiencies. So just a little history there. Uh, we haven't come very far in many cases.

Tina Osso 00:14:02 Well, and I think in the early eighties, another big impact was deregulation of the banking industry of the insurance industry, of the FCC. I mean, all of those deregulations, really the effects of those are felt today. That's why we have runaway drug and healthcare costs. And that's one of the reasons why we've been through a couple of two or three or four recessions. We went through the savings and loan debacle, the whole idea that allowing the deregulation to occur would make things more competitive. Just backfired. Yeah. There was a competition who could get to the top first.

Sarah Kuhns 00:14:58 Yeah. At the expense of everyone else. It seems like. Right. Um, so that that's helpful context. Tina, why don't you sort of paint the picture of what foodbanking was like in the early years and then sort of how it has changed and shifted? Um, up until now

Tina Osso 00:15:24 In the early years, it was really more of a food rescue. What we were looking for was product - food that for some reason, wasn't going to be sold. At that time pre scanning and all the technology that grocery stores used. Now, food sat around in warehouses waiting for grocery stores to order it in restocking. And so consequently, lots of food got close to their expiration date. And, um, prior to foodbanking, that food was discarded. And actually going back, even earlier than that in the late sixties, there was this renegade priest in Arizona who saw crops that were still usable being turned over in the fields when he had people in his congregation that he knew needed food. So he worked with the farmers and organized his congregation to go glean the fields. And that really was the impetus to begin looking for food that was going to waste.

Tina Osso 00:16:51 And, uh, General Mills actually conducted a study in the late seventies and determined that our food manufacturing and distribution was discarding about 347 million tons of food a year was usable. Food just didn't have the shelf life necessary. And so foodbanks organized to try to capture that food and, um, built on our national organization at that time was called second harvest who developed a charity of choice agreements with major manufacturers, general mills being the first one, that if they had food in the pipeline, that wasn't gonna make it to the grocery store shelves, they offer it to foodbanks first, before dumping it. You know, we got really strange things. I can remember getting two trailer loads of rappels, which were Carmel disks that people would wrap

around apples to make an easy caramel apple. Well, you know, you figure, what the hell are you going to do with nearly 40,000 pounds of caramel deaths?

Tina Osso 00:18:20 So we had to get creative and, um, and we took everything. It didn't matter. And so we got damaged goods and had to start programs that could salvage these damaged goods and inspect them for integrity, to be sure that they were safe to distribute. We had to develop networks, find those church food pantries and figure out a way for our food rescue to find its way onto their shelves. And so there was a lot of creative energies and opportunities and a lot of really passionate people involved. And none of us not any of us individually could have accomplished that growth, that phenomenal growth in a pretty short period of time without each other.

Sarah Kuhns 00:19:20 That's very interesting. And what was sort of that shift from food rescue, trying to salvage food into these large scale businesses that their things are today? Do you know what shifted to, what is it? Was it the need or, you know, was it something else that triggered that shift?

Tina Osso 00:19:46 That's a good question. I mean, there are, there were many things that occurred over the years, probably the most significant for the foodbank and its rescue activities was the advent of technology at grocery stores. There was a new inventory control system design called Justin time. And so when grocery stores began their scanning technology, they could track their inventory much closer. And there was no need for these large distribution warehouses to sit around with all this food, because the technology allowed the manufacturers to manufacture inventory just in time to reach the grocery store shelves. So that was one factor. The other was just the sheer size, the amount of food that we were pushing through our system required us to develop new technologies and required us to turn to our communities, to find out what the real needs were and how to address those needs.

Tina Osso 00:21:06 And we soon came to find out what worked in Los Angeles, for instance, 10 work in Fairfield, Ohio. So there were urban responses to hunger that were entirely different than rural responses to hunger and trying to work through those differences caused us all to be a little more empathetic for each other. And really one of the impetuses that caused the foodbanks in Ohio to try to develop their own statewide association, because there were the three Cs, the big ones, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Columbus. And then there was a bunch of poor rural foodbanks. And while some foodbanks were food rich and resource rich, others weren't, and the ones that weren't resided in areas that had high poverty. And so we wanted to figure out a way to share those resources. And so we started meeting actually around, um, what was then known as the temporary emergency food assistance program.

Tina Osso 00:22:30 That was the, the cheese giveaways in the eighties. We had mass distributions of cheese and flour, cornmeal and butter and honey. And once we were successful in depleting USDA's stock of surplus American cheese, the program was canceled and people had come to depend on those cheese giveaways as a strategy for survival. So we actually organized initially to try to get that federal program restored and, and to develop a statewide program, which we did that turned out to be the model for other states to utilize. And one of the first things we did was organized paper plate campaign, which I believe was the first paper plate campaign in the country. And what we did was asked people who were going to mass distributions to write on a paper plate, what this food meant to them. And we collected those plates and sent them to our elected representatives.

Tina Osso 00:23:44 In hundreds of thousands of paper plates were generated from the state of Ohio. And some foodbankers hand carried them. Some of us mailed them. It was an incredibly unifying experience and showed us the power that we could have when we involved everyone, clients, pantry directors, foodbank directors, church leaders in the fight against hunger. And we were successful. USDA dropped the word temporary from the title, uh, called it the emergency food assistance program. And it became an entitlement program where they would, they would actually go out and purchase surplus commodities through section 30, two funding that would give us a variety of food that had been produced. It was too much for the market to bear sort of a price stabilization program. So we saw everything from orange juice because of early freezes and Florida to cranberries to chicken.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:24:55 And what about white figs?

Tina Osso 00:24:59 No, my God figs and raisins. Oh my God. Uh, dry beans, you know, there was a huge variety of product that became available to us. And because of that, we stopped doing mass distributions and started distributing that food through our networks of food pantries and soup kitchen. And then we began to realize that the model of food pantries was almost demeaning. You would go into a food pantry and they would pack a box for you without any regard of what your food allergies or preferences may be. And after conducting surveys, we discovered that lots of clients would just dumping food that they weren't using. So we developed choice pantries, which was a much more dignified way. People could come in and select their own food. And in our area, we involved the Ohio state extension services to add a nutrition component and actually color-coded shelves and set up a shopping cards so that people were able to select foods that would put a rainbow of colors on their plate that conformed to the pyramid. We did cooking demonstrations. I mean, it was a whole new way to distribute food that made the people accessing that food feel like it was a more normal experience of acquiring food.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:26:53 And Tina is being really modest here. Um, this choice food pantry model was I think, a really important milestone for how foodbanks worked with non-profit and faith-based organizations to develop these choice models. There was a lot of education that needed to be done, but also giving up some of what our volunteers at the agency level felt like was their control to saying that this is a partnership I am here in partnership to serve my friends and neighbors who find themselves in situations where they're hungry. Um, they're in need of food because of a lack of resources and it didn't come easy, Sarah. I mean, it did not come easy at all. And there was a lot of strife, but I will tell you that the one thing that food bankers do well is to be thoughtful in their approach of bringing people along. And then once you have a model to make it as easy as possible for others to come and learn and to be able to replicate in a, became a very huge sense of pride as other foodbanks began to implement choice food pantry models and the agencies more than rose to the occasion.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:28:22 And they quickly moved from a welcoming grocery store type environment to being able to say, what more can I do? It's not just food. How do I bring about other programs and services to my community? And again, the partners that were at the table to help that pivot take place. This is pretty phenomenal. And I know because even through COVID what I hear for many of the agencies now is we so long to get back to our choice food pantry model and get COVID behind this. So we can continue and start to engage again with our clients, the way that we used to in a sense of community. So I don't want to let her get away with not taking credit for being the mother of that invention.

Sarah Kuhns 00:29:18 That's the wonderful, yeah. It seems like this evolution has sort of been strategic while also being mindful of the folks that you're serving and what would be the most dignified and respectful way to serve them. You touched on it slightly, but I was wondering, um, could you go into a little bit more detail of the origins of the association and sort of your role that you played? I know you were pretty instrumental in that as well, so I'd love to hear the story behind that.

Tina Osso 00:29:53 Okay. So, um, so once we won that TEFAP battle, we were like, okay, we're done. And that was in the late eighties, early nineties, uh, Dan S, who was the director of the Akron Canton Foodbank at that time, he and Steve Gibbs were wise enough to go ahead and do an incorporation and file for nonprofit status. And I believe that happens somewhere around 90 or 91, right before the advent of welfare reform. Remember when I talked about how sometimes you're just in the right place at the right time having done that gave us a vehicle with which to begin addressing the impacts that welfare reform was likely to bring about. And so Lisa and I, and Lisa you'll have to chime in here. Lisa and I started working late into the night writing grant proposals, trying to raise money to hire her as a, an advocate for the association.

Tina Osso 00:31:12 And at that time the internet was in its infancy. And so I can remember, you know, the dial up connections and faxing documents back and forth. And, and me saying at two o'clock in the morning, Lisa, I got to get some sleep. My foodbank opens at 7:30 in the morning, but Lisa really gave me the insight into how strong an advocate needs to be. I mean, yes, there were a lot of creative and passionate and dedicated people sitting around in that round bar. What was the name of that round bar? Do you remember?

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:32:01 Round Bar down in German village?

Tina Osso 00:32:03 Yeah. See, see what happens

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:32:09 That's when work gets done.

Tina Osso 00:32:13 And it did. I mean, we would sit at that bar and throw around every crazy idea that we have. And one of the crazy ideas actually came from a meeting we had with the state association in Michigan who had been successful in landing a state dollars to help them rescue surplus cherries. I think it was, and that lit a fire under us because Ohio has a teaming agricultural community. And so we, we actually hired our first director who was David Maywhoor. And we did not have any place to put him. So the Mid-Ohio foodbank had an empty office. So we put David there and while David had charisma, he was not as well organized as we needed. And so we wound up hiring Lisa as our advocate and, um, she single handedly whipped us into shape, turned us into advocates, taught us how to tell our stories and how important it was to engage with everyone all along the continuum.

Tina Osso 00:33:39 And so we developed this ASP for the Ohio production Alliance. Is that what we called it then? Ohio agriculture clearance program. Oh, right. There you go. And, uh, I can remember prowling the hallways at the state house meeting with staffers and cornering legislators. I don't remember who it was, but I do remember that we were waiting outside of a finance committee meeting. And, um, one of the members came walking out that we had been trying to get a meeting with. And there were like five or six of us. And Lisa went up to him and he started backing up and we all surrounded him. He was like in a corner, literally in a corner. And, uh, he finally agreed to meet with us in his office. You know, Lisa was the last one in the room. Always. She never gave up. She would not be quiet.

Tina Osso 00:34:48 She got us involved and engaged. I mean, I testified in front of congressmen and senators, you know, this hippie foodbanker, but Lisa always made me feel like what I had to say was important and people leave it to hear it. I can remember at one point I was talking about one of the volunteers and one of the food pantries that I ran into in a grocery store and she was buying cat food. Um, and I said, I didn't know you had a cat. She said, I don't. Lisa said, you need to tell that story. You need to bring that can of cat food with you and slam it on the podium and tell this story. And I did, I would've never had the chance to do that. Had it not been for Lisa

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:35:46 Oh Tina, we were all in it together. And we still are all in it together. But that's the problem that we now face is that the real world realities have to be brought to bear in the realm of policymaking. And if those stories are not front and center, the lady in the grocery store buying the cat food will ever find her way to an audience to tell her story. So we, we as advocates, those that do this work, must stand ready to bear witness to what we know to be the truth and the reality. And sometimes it's uncomfortable. Tina's is talking about a time when business rules, the Ohio general assembly and the, the tactics, the approaches were against the grain. Um, I remember dragging a shopping cart around the state house in, and it made people uncomfortable, but they needed to see, they needed to see why we needed this appropriation.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:36:59 We needed diversity, we needed fresh fruits and vegetables. We had opportunities here. Farmers told us what they needed, and that was only going to happen if they supported these efforts. And boy, we were in the waning minutes of the third quarter that first year out to get that appropriation and need to give credit where credit's due, which was then to Governor Voinovich, who was a deep man of faith. And I think his staff were feeling somewhat beat up by us. And I don't know who got, I don't, I don't know who got to Governor Voinovich, his priest, but I do know that that whatever that sermon was that that priest who delivered that was the final decision that he came out and said, yes, we're going to make sure that the foodbanks get funding in this budget. And that was the beginning. Um, that was the beginning of the Ohio food and agriculture clearance program. And so I would say the, the founding, the founding funding that really got us moving in the direction, uh, to bring all of our programs, the commodity supplemental food program, the, the TEFAP, the emergency food assistance program, our state funded programs together in, in a way that we worked collaboratively. So we could share the resources, but also leverage the resources that not all the foodbanks had, that there's a lot of sharing and the growth from that.

Tina Osso 00:38:40 Yeah, I can remember once we got that funding, I believe we were, shared Harvest was the first foodbank to get a load of apples from Lynd's fruit fund. And Lester Lynd himself drove the truck to the foodbank with a load of wonderful apples. And I met him at the dock and walked him around the foodbank and he asked me a million questions and I asked him a million questions. And in the end we wound up in tears because he realized all the years that he couldn't utilize his crop in all the years, that people could have enjoyed those juicy apples. And, and that was really the beginning of those farmers being so committed to, I mean, what do they do? They grow food? What better partnership is there than farmers and foodbanks at people's empty refrigerators?

Sarah Kuhns 00:39:57 What powerful story and partnership. Lisa, welfare reform was another sort of point in the association's journey. And so I was wondering if you could sort of talk about, you know, how welfare reform shifted the work that you were doing and the association with was doing foodbanks within the network, and also learn some of the lessons learned.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:40:27 Well, I think Tina touched a little bit on it. I mean, there was some early work in the eighties around reforming, what were then the work opportunity reconciliation act. That was, I think Congress's first attempt. And the idea is that there would be these pathways of

opportunity through education and training. Well, that was all well and good. But as these opportunities presented themselves to the states, they really didn't have the ability to envision what that looked like. So as time went on, I mean, there was some work. It was, I would say it was the early stages of dabbling to moving into the nineties. And states were being given broad latitude with experimentation around how they delivered public assistance programs, primarily basic cash then known as aid to families with dependent children. Uh, Tina talked about having a general assistance, a very modest benefit for single adults without the pendants.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:41:39 And unfortunately the economy was not doing well then. And one of the first casualties of quote welfare reform was a movement at the state of Ohio to eliminate that basic cash assistance known as general assistance. And that was the last time made outside of, I guess, Medicaid expansion and the protection of Medicaid expansion. Did we actually see masses of individuals March on the state house with huge protests, trying to stop the general assembly from eliminating general assistance at the time over 148,000 people who depended on this modest amount of cash assistance were at risk of having no safety net other than what they could get from a local charities in their community or a homeless shelter. And I think once that started, and then the passage of the personal responsibility and work opportunity reconciliation act of the Clinton administration, I want to say that both parties have been involved in taking a very radical approach to safety net programs.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:42:57 And at that point, that basic entitlement that has existed for 60 years as a federal entitlement was creed was eliminated in these block grants called the temporary assistance to needy families, uh, were created in 1996 in billions, billions of dollars were given to the state to quote experiment with moving people from welfare to work. And again, good intentions quickly became a real race to the bottom. And in the early days of welfare reform, these are women with children. We didn't know much about what were their situations, were they victims of domestic violence? Uh, were they single parents? Were they, was it a mother, uh, who was left with children and basically deserted by a spouse? Um, what kind of physical and mental health issues, housing issues, transportation issues that were they dealing with there wasn't really, um, a strategic approach. Um, and that was left up to the members of the general assembly to create what this program would look like. And it was called Ohio Works First. And, uh, some of the federal guidelines was a five-year time limit and Ohio decided to go with a three-year time limit. So how do you take 750,000 others and children? There was a three year lifetime time limit that's correct. Yep. And get them, uh, assess them, get them the supports they needed and on a path to self-sufficiency. So those early at a time when there wasn't any living wage jobs.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:44:50 Yeah. So that three years went by really fast. But what we saw very quickly is that the rules that were written, we couldn't even understand as professionals let alone someone that might lack of basic high school diploma, um, may have learning disabilities, clearly a lack of transportation. So again, trying to meet a work requirement was impossible if you'd lived in a rural area and had no access to public transportation. So the case loads fell pretty rapidly. And at the same time, we could see the fallout as those families in mass came to, uh, food pantries. And it wasn't just their basic cash assistance that they lost. They lost access to their food stamps. They lost access to the children's health insurance program, uh, healthcare for their children. Those early days were pretty brutal for, for, for many, many people. And I'll tell you what really came out of that is the growth of the social service and faith-based organizations who saw the suffering that was taking place and stepped forward.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:46:10 It took, it took years to get our state agencies to understand that the dollars, if they weren't going for basic support and cash assistance to these families, we needed the supports to be able to provide that at the community level and the way of, of, um, grants to help support some of the non-profit and faith-based, um, human service delivery, everything from housing to food, to childcare, to fill in the blanks that you would, you would need it. And I look back on it now. And certainly there are, there are children who became adults who lack the basic needs as a result of welfare reform that not only did they lose opportunity, they continue to struggle to this day as adults because we failed them. We put them in situations of abject grinding poverty. And so lessons learned is if we don't have the basic supports to be able to provide people with a roof over their head food on the table, access to healthcare and medicine that they need, that they will not become productive members of society.

Tina Osso 00:47:38 And I think the most aggravating thing about all of this is had the people who were making up these rules, sitting in their comfortable offices, taking the time to look historically at welfare and the support it provided. They would have seen that there were, uh, high peaks and low peaks when the economy was doing well, people were working and they were off the program when the economy started sinking. Usually those low wage workers were the first ones out the door. And back on the program about a third, as I recall of people who were on public assistance were just there. They were generationally poor. And in the barriers that they face, there were no resources, um, no role models, no vision of how to pull them out, but the other two-thirds knew what to do. They just needed the support along the way, and welfare reform yanked that out from underneath them. And it caused foodbanks who were designed as stop gaps as emergency food fillers to become a strategy for survival month to month. They would, as a matter of fact, in our area, I encouraged people to go to their food pantry first, to access what they could from the food pantry, and then use the resources that they had to go to the grocery and fill out the gaps that allowed them to stretch the resources and hopefully make it through the month end or till the next paycheck.

Sarah Kuhns 00:49:31 It seems like if the rhetoric and the attacks tend to come in a cycle and in a pattern, I think we're still sort of hearing that right. All right today. Well, I wanted to end this off by asking you both reflecting on your careers. What are some of the challenges that you've experienced and what are some of these success stories and what are you most proud of?

Tina Osso 00:50:00 I think the lesson I learned was that it doesn't really matter how hard you work or how many jobs you have. If you're not earning enough, just to support your basic needs, you are always living on that economic edge. And it only takes one thing to push you over. And currently I feel like the policies have devolved into blaming the victim rather than the system. And so there's no real impetus to take a look at the system that's evolved since welfare reform and make those necessary changes. I think that our responses have been incredible as a group of folks who had no clue what we were getting ourselves into one about these creative solutions building on federal programs, like the commodity supplemental food program, and making sure that every county in Ohio had access to that program for overweight population that took many years and lots of advocating the backpack program, which identified the need of children who were going without over the weekends between the free lunch that they had on Fridays and the free breakfast they got on Mondays.

Tina Osso 00:51:46 And so developing a backpack program to address childhood hunger was an amazing accomplishment. Just the logistics of figuring out how to get that food into the hands of kids, developing a centralized database to help us understand those needs, what the needs were and give us the tools that we needed, not only to advocate for them, but also to understand what we

needed to do to address the changing environment. And I think the thing that I'm most proud of is being involved with such a diverse group of very passionate people who worked diligently to make a difference in the lives of people who struggle every day. And that that work continues that they are not forgotten and that we are bringing up people who will take our place when we leave that struggle that it will continue. My brother used to ask me why I was so involved that hunger and poverty was here before I got here.

Tina Osso 00:53:07 And it was going to be here long after I'm gone. So why work so hard? And, you know, I said, it's like, <inaudible>, you know, the, the, um, the guy who kept pushing the Boulder up the side of the mountain and he almost to the top, and it would roll back down again. I think that's a great metaphor for foodbanking and poverty and hunger. And what I came to realize is that it's not that that Boulder rolls back down the mountain and you have to start all over again. It's all the hands that come to help you when you're pushing. And I have faith that eventually that damn is going to get over the mountain and we'll all be on the other side,

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:53:58 Man, that's a hard one to follow what's that Tina pretty much encapsulated all this innovation and things that honestly, I guess I had just forgotten about that. That were part of the, the catalyst, you know, operating the people that are often in power. Not only do they not know the suffering, but they lack empathy and understanding so much of the economic challenges that, that I think we suffer today is because of the inequities. A lot of that, um, is rooted in, in race. And we still can't really deal with that. We haven't reckoned with that. What's made it increasingly more difficult. I think at the federal level is money and politics at the state level. It's. And I say this in the years that I've been doing this budget work it's term limits, the lack of institutional knowledge of how we got to where we were, or the reason that the state operates the lack of true leadership.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:55:10 People have no time to develop relationships, to get to know programs, to get to understand the role of government in everyone's lives, whether you'd be rich or poor or just plain middle-class. So, again, I think we're dealing with this now, um, more so than ever. And if we don't learn from the past, then I guess we're going to be doomed to repeat it, uh, in the future. So in a lot of this is true now. I mean, let's face it that many people who didn't know what a foodbank was. Sure knows what a foodbank is today, because who were the first responders in the early days of COVID. And, and I told the story earlier, this shouldn't have surprised anybody. We were nearly 10 years in to the recovery from the great recession, but in, in late 2019, the federal reserve reported that 40% of Americans couldn't even come up with \$400 to address an unexpected emergency crisis.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:56:16 So when COVID hit with massive shut downs, what were people to live on? So people who were donors a few weeks before COVID hit and the shutdowns took place were voluntary to donating. Um, they were making deposits every month to the work that we did in the way of their generosity, who then found themselves in, in late March, standing in line with hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions nationwide of people that look just like them who didn't have any money, didn't have credit cards, didn't have family support or a bank account to fall back on. So I think that we need to look at exactly how we got here, but I also know that the people who have prompted this whole system up, who have continued to work on the front line, certainly putting their own health, welfare, and safety throughout, um, COVID and the generosity.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:57:22 And it wasn't just the volunteers and the staff, but the citizen soldiers who came to, to help stand us up through the deployment of the Ohio National Guard and in the commissioning of, of the Guard members in response to this, that Governor DeWine, did I have

to tell you, I think that is going to be one of certainly my proudest, uh, reflections in how all of this came together to respond, but more importantly, that to be able to tell the story, it played itself out on the major networks as these lines were just based in Ohio or a local communities, this was a nationwide epidemic of hunger and despair. So to be able to, to build from that, I think it's going to be really important, but we also need to make sure that as Tina said, this people who work every day and play by the rules need to be compensated for a hard day's work.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:58:21 They need to have access to benefits that provide a quality of life of paid time, off sick time, access to healthcare and opportunity to save for retirement. So they have dignity in their, their senior years. Unlike what we see now in the greatest generation who helped build this country, who are attempting to live on a few hundred dollars of social security, uh, they played by the rules and we need to do more, not less. And I think building on the core food programs, the Ohio food program and agriculture clearance program, new insights and vision within the United States department of agriculture at the federal level, we saw an increase in snap benefits for the first time and since 1970 and a realization that the thrifty food plan was horribly antiquated and outdated. So we started to make some progress, this, the pandemic EBT, did we ever think that the kids that were out school through no fault of their own missing the school, lunch and breakfast programs, their parents will be given support throughout the pandemic to be able to replace those meals.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 00:59:31 Tina said the backpack program, again, we really need to work. And certainly in the build back better plan, uh, opportunities and provisions to get federal funding, to support those weekend and out of time, school meal programs for kids to, to talk about data. Data is power, Ohio foodbanks were the first foodbanks that recognized. And we were mandated to do eligibility determination that we were able to collect that data and turn that data into stories. And as I say, data will drive dollars, but it will also allow you to document the importance of these programs and how we leveraged resources. So we've done this in the power of people through the power of partnerships, the power of mobilization and advocacy. But I also have to say that there was certainly divine intervention that helps, that helped guide us. And I am so proud of the work we've done. And so honored to have had mentors like pina and many of the original foodbank directors that are still with us today because they'll help to guide you, Sarah, and your colleagues, as you pick up the mantle invite to the future,

Tina Osso 01:00:55 You know, it's going to be, it's going to be corny. Cause you know, I'm all about the corn. Uh, I don't know where I heard it, but at one point someone said, we're all really angels on this earth, but we all only have one way and we need each other to fly. And I think the hunger movement encapsulates that thought that there's all these angels out there and all we need to do is put our arms around one another and we can do anything.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt 01:01:28 I want to echo that. Tina, I think that we, we can move mountains. We can move boulders together. We have to find common ground, this polarization that we find ourselves in. Now, if we don't figure out a way out of this, we really are at risk. And I fear every day when we lose our ability to empathize, to show concern and compassion for our fellow brothers and sisters and the least among us, we are doing the perish. So fight on Sarah fight on young advocates and anti-hunger, and anti-poverty advocates because you, you have to take up the mantle on this and, uh, it can be done. You have better skills, I would say than we did. You're not going to deal with late night fax machines and the first generation of

Sarah Kuhns 01:02:33 What a wonderful place to end on. I want to thank you both for sharing, not only your time today, but just all your wonderful stories about good and bad. I really appreciate

Sarah K. 01:02:55 As we discuss the evolution of foodbanking, we naturally had to discuss the evolution of the social safety net and how that has impacted the folks that we serve both good and bad. And I know we have talked about this so many times before on this podcast, but we are really at a turning point for how we think about the social safety net and what we think the government's role for supporting the basic needs of their citizens should be the build back better act, which includes so many of our priorities, like the expanded child tax credit, the summer EBT program, and then improved community eligibility provision is in final negotiations. And I know it hasn't passed yet. Um, but if, and when it passes, it will be one of the largest investments in the social safety net, especially for families in a very long time. And, you know, reflecting back on this conversation that I had with Tina and Lisa, um, I can only think about what an impact this build back better act. Well, have, you know, say 30 years down the line. I really can't wait to see what the future holds. Not only for the Ohio association of foodbanks, but the anti hunger and anti-poverty advocacy space. So I want to thank you for listening in to our conversation today. Please make sure that you're, um, subscribing and following and we will see you next time.