

CAPITAL AREA FOOD BANK: HUNGRY HEARTS, HUNGRY CITIES

Posted on 16/02/2012 by Naider



Bruce Springsteen is one of the best-known artists in the American popular music culture. His song *Hungry Heart* was a hit back in 1980. *Everybody wants to have a home, nobody wants to be alone*, claims the song. That was probably what Lynn Brantley, who has been in charge of the [Capital Area Food Bank](#), the largest food distribution institution in Washington DC and its surrounding cities.

Lynn is one of those social entrepreneurs with a hungry heart, so hungry that she hasn't been content to satisfy friends and family but a whole legion of people who for one reason or another have been in need of food. They started with a handful of volunteers who were horrified that in the capital of the richest country in the world there could be so many people going hungry. The CAFB now has more than a hundred professionals who day by day try to stop one of the primary and physiological needs of the human being when these are not met, distributing almost 14 million kilos of food a year to half a million people who live in the metropolitan area of the capital city, in a system that is not precisely characterized by redistribution.

According to the [Global Metro Monitor](#), the Washington DC metropolitan area is one of the 10 cities with the highest per capita income in the world in 2011 and the third in the US behind Hartford and San José. Dragged mainly by the political and bureaucratic apparatus of the United States, by its important intellectual presence through social r&d institutes and by think tanks, it is a reference for anyone who has intentions of political influence - for obvious reasons - in the US and around the world. And a few kilometers from DC is Baltimore, one of the 50 most dangerous cities on the planet according to the study by the Citizen Council for Public Safety of Mexico.

In the other American *real life*, the one that goes beyond the Capitol, Disney World, Hollywood and that debauched Las Vegas, and a long way from the idea of the *American dream* Although a few miles from the White House, people like Claudia, a Salvadoran who has worked in cleaning companies for 10 years and who came to this country eager to progress; a few streets away lives Mike, the son of a cowboy who immigrated to the capital after the Vietnam War; and of course there is also Darlon, of Hindu origin and blind; And why not mention Félix, a Bolivian from the upper valley of Cochabamba but who already feels he is from Arlington, after 20 years there.

The four of them have been working regularly for years, but for one reason or another - a job crisis, they've had children, their company has cut their hours to part-time, or they simply can't afford the rent - they are part of that universe of 40 million people in the United States who live below the line of material scarcity. All of them *are* North America, the kind that some irresistibly insist on denying. The four of them receive food supplements, the so-called **food stamps**, an important income redistribution formula, specifically aimed at obtaining food.

Publicity about the government's food stamp program, called [SNAP](#) (The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as *food stamps*) exercised by the federal government has been running for 70 years, but it was only recently that the Department of Agriculture itself, promoter of the program, has decided request more determined help from those who know best how to reduce hunger in the field: the food banks, which, having a deep knowledge of the terrain, working with other food dispensaries and humanitarian aid institutions, have decided to launch a campaign to achieve increase the numbers of favored. Unfortunately, almost two-thirds of the beneficiaries entitled to *food stamps* are not able to obtain them, mainly due to lack of information, despite being eligible.

The Capital Area Food Bank, part of the nationwide [Feeding America](#) network of about 200 banks of food, works as a modern and compact institution, in the most operational sense of logistics systems management, managing like clockwork its two wholesale distribution warehouses, its mobile

delivery programs, in addition to having modern and effective educational programs. They are interconnected with their counterpart institutions in other states through an integrated information system, with flexible processes and doing what they do best: working to reduce hunger.

Precisely in these days when the model of the European welfare state is faltering, days when the functionality of universal health insurance is being debated -still waiting to be approved in the US as promised by Obama-, and in which it becomes clear that the great fortunes pay relatively low tax rates (there's billionaire Warren Buffet to admit it) is that a more determined effort is required to prevent starvation in America.

Thus, this country at its forefront has also known how to develop alternative systems to what public policies establish, and although income redistribution has not seemed a priority over the years, the current crisis has once again made clear the needs of the weakest link in the chain: the worker, the part-time worker, the mother of a large family, the long-term immigrant and, in general, those who are part of minority groups. And precisely a device that has worked efficiently has been that of philanthropy and patronage. If the government does not provide what the people need, civil society organizes to find it privately, in the end social sensitivity does not understand latitudes or languages.

When looking at the US Census Bureau software application, [published in the New York Times](#), it can be noticed, how in almost all the big cities of the world, the difference in wages, educational level and income by neighborhood is in some cases abysmal. What is most striking is that these differences are maintained and sometimes amplified based on ethnic origin. Hispanics with Hispanics, whites with whites, and African-Americans with African-Americans. But in order to think about achieving an effective integration, perhaps an even more primary need must be covered, that of food, an unavoidable issue in the future presidential election, since the threats of cuts have managed to put on the table again a problem that affects one of every seven North American inhabitants: hunger. In this way, 77% of DC voters, increasingly critical of their representatives, think that [hunger is a serious problem in the US](#).

The Capital Area Food Bank began to spread the word about the SNAP program from its inception, mainly in downtown DC, expanding its presence to have a team that has managed to increase applications for participation in said program in the region significantly in the last four years. One of the biggest obstacles has been people's lack of knowledge about rights and the negative myths surrounding the program, among which there is a wide range of stories. From the fictitious arguments that those who request the supplements will be penalized or charged in the future, to that it is a method of tracking and identifying illegal immigrants, or that it even brings future penalties at the immigration office. Myths that the CAFB tries to dispel. It is neither an indication for the immigrant nor is it a debt contracted with the State. It is simply an auxiliary food bonus.

Most of the beneficiaries are people born in the United States, although there are also those who access these aids as legal residents in North America for more than five years, including people from as diverse origins as Mexico, Honduras or Ethiopia. As for skeptical citizens, it should be remembered that with these coupons economic activity is not penalized, but rather, it is activated. There are calculations that show that for every five dollars distributed to the beneficiaries of the program, almost twice as much economic activity is obtained for the community. Including in a recent [Sodexo Foundation study](#), it has been shown that allowing hunger costs nine times more than preventing it. Another widespread myth spreads that those who request this bonus are accused of buying expensive, unhealthy food and making insipid expenses. The reality, on the contrary, says that the beneficiaries of the program reach more nutritious products per dollar than the rest of regular buyers. It goes without saying that with the card you cannot buy anything other than food.

The basic requirements to access the benefits of the program include the level of income -less than the ceiling proposed by the Department of Agriculture-, having an equally low disposable income

and having US nationality or permanent residence. Javier, a Peruvian citizen who has lived in Woodbridge for several years but still without his *green card*, protests quite logically when he learns of this last requirement. And he says, quite logically, that his son was born there, and that therefore he has a right. You're right. To this end, it has been possible for minors to access a legitimate right, through their parents, who will claim a card for them.

In the ideological field, there are also fictions. The idea is widespread in the most conservative layers that *"he who does not have it is because he does not want to"*. The Indian economist, professor at Harvard University and Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen, among others, has tried to dismantle this distortion, explaining the pernicious consequences that inequality brings, not only in terms of crime but also in terms of economic success. Sen defends that in addition to the inequalities of access, there are other capacities that survive, the so-called *agency capacities*, those of "wanting to be" or of aspiration, without which, the levels of success and goals They are more moderate. However, here it is about leveling the most basic inequality within the scale of human motivations, that of food, at the most basic level of physiological security.

Bolivian researcher [Roberto Laserna](#), doctor from the University of California-Berkeley, one of the economists Bolivia's most prestigious in regional planning, highlights that the option of food stamps gives consumers freedom of choice, which also makes them more responsible. As for the logistical benefits, it stands out that it is easier to administer, which in turn implies less risk of corruption when compared to the purchases and deliveries of physical goods. He also highlights the possibility of achieving a greater diversity of demand, since when people choose the product, the range of demanded goods is much broader and therefore the impact on the less concentrated and more diverse market, although in his opinion he is suspicious of the possibility that the recipient, needing another good, obtains food to sell at a low price, admitting that even so, distorting the market, money is lost, but he manages to satisfy his need (which could even be medicines, home repairs, debts, etc.).

But beyond the reasons and objective needs, the sensitivity of an important sector of the population is palpable, which becomes even more visible through volunteer work, this being another of the strengths that stands out in the United States, but above all at the Capital Area Food Bank. Thousands of people have passed through the assisted centers to offer their time for the good of the community, including a few weeks ago the Obama family himself and thousands of other anonymous volunteers donating one of the most precious scarce goods: their time.

So it is that hungry hearts, in solidarity, try to redistribute food and manage to cover the insufficiency that survives in our days of hyperconnection, despite the improvements in living standards, health, and forms of production. Hunger is as old as humanity, but as technology advances, it has not yet been completely eradicated as a lasting symptom of the system.

More information about Capital Area Food Bank: www.capitalareafoodbank.org

More information about the SNAP program: [Department of Agriculture - Food and Nutrition Service](#)

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