

“ARKANSANS ARE FIGHTING HUNGER,” by Dr. Chris Jones

Food is a basic need. In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, food, water, and breathing are basic needs that must be met before we can even think of anything else. I want to take a moment to recognize the many Arkansans who work tirelessly to provide food for those in need.

First, let’s acknowledge the monumental efforts by the Arkansas rice industry. Not only do they put food on tables across the globe, but in September, they donated nearly 284,500 pounds of rice to the Arkansas Food Bank in honor of National Rice Month. This generous donation happens every year during Hunger Action Month, thanks to our hard working farmers.

Next, I want to praise the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, the Arkansas Food Bank, and the numerous food-assistance programs across the state, from regional food banks to local pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters. These organizations are essential in combating hunger across Arkansas.

Food Insecurity in Arkansas

Over half a million Arkansans face food insecurity. Let that sink in. Over half a million Arkansans struggle to access enough nutritious food. A recent U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) study has identified Arkansas as the most food insecure state in the country.

One big reason that so many of our neighbors suffer food insecurity is because of the presence of food deserts—areas with limited access to fresh food. The USDA found that every county in Arkansas—all 75 – has food deserts. Food deserts are areas where residents must travel over 10 miles in rural areas to find healthy food.

This is a major challenge for low-income Arkansans and the elderly who often do not have access to transportation. Even in the few areas across Arkansas that have public transportation, bus routes don’t always reach food banks or soup kitchens.

Federal Assistance Offers Relief

Thankfully, federal nutrition programs are helping to ease some of the burden. Programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), WIC (Women, Infants, and Children), and the National School Lunch Program provide critical assistance. This year, an additional program called the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) helped over 250,000 Arkansas students with \$120 in grocery assistance over the summer.

Room for Improvement

However, state support is still lacking. Arkansas lawmakers did approve a 2023 law to raise the asset limit for SNAP eligibility from \$2,250 to \$5,500 for most families, but this was a compromise. The original proposal aimed to raise the limit to \$12,500, but Governor Sanders opposed it, resulting in a smaller increase. What she approved falls far short of addressing the full scale of food insecurity in the state. Why deny Arkansans this needed support?

As Arkansans, we must continue to support efforts that help fight hunger. Whether through donations, volunteering, or advocating for stronger state policies, we all have a role to play. Let's work together to ensure no one in our community has to struggle to put food on the table. Reach out to your local food banks or legislators to make a difference today.

If you want to see something done about food insecurity, we must elect leaders who will address the full scale of the problem. We must share the future.

Fortunately, every election is an opportunity to shape the future. This year's election is no different. If you believe that EVERY Arkansas should be Food Secure and you if you care about truly addressing this issue, then make your voice heard and encourage others to do the same. **Voter registration ends on October 7, 2024. Early voting in starts on October 21, 2024, and the election is on November 5, 2024!**