

Addressing Hunger in America

An Interview with Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, Chief Executive Officer, Feeding America

EDITORS' NOTE *Claire Babineaux-Fontenot serves as Chief Executive Officer of Feeding America. Prior to joining Feeding America, she spent 13 years as a part of Walmart's leadership team with her most recent role being Executive Vice President and Global Treasurer. In this role, she had global responsibility for tax, treasury operations, capital markets, investor relations, global risk management, casualty and self-insurance*



Claire Babineaux-Fontenot

leading teams across 28 countries with over 1,000 associates worldwide. Before Walmart, she was partner-in-charge of the Baton Rouge office and tax practice leader for Adams and Reese LLP, one of U.S. News & World Report's "Best Law Firms." Earlier in her career, she was dispute resolution practice group leader for the southwest region at PwC (formerly PricewaterhouseCoopers) and an assistant secretary for the Office of Legal Affairs for the State of Louisiana. Later, Babineaux-Fontenot served on a number of nonprofit boards including the Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children, the board of directors and audit committee for the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, and the board of trustees and finance and audit committee for the National Urban League and the National Association of Black Accountants. She also was on the corporate advisory board for the Association of Latino Professionals for America. Additionally, she served on the global board of directors and executive committee of the Walmart Foundation. Her board experience also includes the board and the audit committee for Walmart Chile S.A, chair of the board of directors for ATLAS Technical Consultants and audit committee member and nominating and governance committee chair at Charah Solutions. Babineaux-Fontenot was named one of TIME's 100 most influential pioneers, leaders, titans, artists and icons of 2020. She holds a BS degree from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette; a JD from Southern University Law Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and a Master of Laws in Taxation from SMU Dedman School of Law in Dallas, Texas.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Feeding America® (feedingamerica.org) is the largest hunger-relief organization in the United States. Through a network of more than 200 food banks, 21 statewide food bank associations, and over 60,000 partner agencies, food pantries and meal programs, we helped provide 6.6 billion meals to tens of millions of people in need last year. Feeding America also supports programs that prevent food waste and improve food security among the people we serve, brings attention to the social and systemic barriers that contribute to*

food insecurity in our nation, and advocates for legislation that protects people from going hungry.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead Feeding America and made you feel it was the right fit?

Two things rise to the top of the list: the fact that the impact on people's lives is so meaningful and that the challenges, though

difficult, are actually solvable. A country that throws away over 66 billion pounds of perfectly edible food each year (not counting household waste) can choose not to have any of its people struggle with food insecurity. We are far from daunted – though the work is certainly not done, we're really making progress!

As for what led me to Feeding America, you probably don't have enough room in this piece for the whole story. It will need to suffice to say that I've always known that we do not need to look to distant shores to find people who do not have access to enough nutritious food. I've had remarkable professional opportunities and a career that exceeds even my childhood fantasies about "what I'm going to be when I grow up." Corny though it may sound, I think all of those experiences that I couldn't understand the "why" of have led me to this one – the greatest chance I've ever had to provide meaningful service to people. I've been privileged to partner with so many people across this country who show generosity and kindness to their neighbors.



Blue Ridge Area Food Bank volunteers unload produce at Mobile Food Pantry distribution in Rustburg, Virginia as they prepare to serve the neighbors that visit during the pandemic



Claire Babineaux-Fontenot attends the grand opening of the new food bank in Puerto Rico

How do you define Feeding America's mission and purpose?

Feeding America exists to ensure that every person in the United States, no matter where they live, has equitable access to enough nutritious food for a healthy life. We understand that achieving that mission will take more than the conventional concept of food banking and it will take more than just us. So, who are we? Our network includes more than 200 food banks, 21 statewide food bank associations, and over 60,000 food pantries and meal programs, serving all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. To be sure, getting food to people who need it is core to what we do – from last summer (2020) to this one (2021) our network provided 6.6 billion meals to people facing hunger. We did not stop there. We also recognize that while the food we provide meets people's immediate needs, it is critical that we also address the factors that cause people to experience food insecurity in the first place.

In partnership with food banks, policymakers, supporters, community partners and people with lived experience of hunger, we also support programs that prevent food waste and improve food security among the people who utilize food bank services, bring attention to the social and systemic barriers that contribute to food insecurity in our nation, and advocate for legislation designed to provide the food access that everyone needs and deserves.

Is there an effective understanding today about the critical state of hunger in America and what more can be done to build a better understanding of this crisis?

The pandemic certainly raised awareness of the existence of hunger in America. I doubt that we will soon forget those lines of cars that went on for miles, sometimes lined up for hours before the distributions started, waiting for

food. The lines included so many people who never imagined being there, having suddenly lost their jobs and turned to our network for support. My concern is that the American public will wrongly think all is well now. But the lines have returned to the insides of buildings – the most recent estimates from the USDA are that 38 million people are food insecure.

To heighten the awareness that the crisis continues for so many and that tens of millions of people in this country were living with food insecurity before the pandemic will require partnerships. Trusted sources like yourselves will need to continue to write and televise stories about the ongoing challenges. We will need to celebrate the successes when we have breakthroughs and “fail fast” and learn quickly when something isn't working.

A key and essential missing voice in this work is that of people with lived experience of hunger. They are our key partners and those who are most impacted by our actions or inactions. Imagine how catalytic it would be if they – nearly 40 million people with invaluable expertise – were more actively engaged in this work alongside charitable organizations, lawmakers, community groups, schools, faith-based communities and members of the general public who together truly decide that hunger in our country is unacceptable. If all of those constituencies came together it would have an amazing impact.

How has the work of Feeding America evolved and will you provide an overview of Feeding America's initiatives?

The Feeding America network was established in the late 1970s as food banks started operating across the country. In fact, our founder is credited with creating the very first food bank. Our network has grown to be the largest hunger-relief organization in the country. The initial focus was food rescue and food assistance. The food

banks of today have not forgotten – and in fact have improved upon – that important aspect of what we provide, and they have become so much more. They are pillars in their communities, providing food, nutrition assistance, benefits outreach and even job skills training programs. Food banks are a part of their communities, partnering with thousands of local nonprofits and reaching tens of millions of people each year.

We know that we cannot be all things to all people, but our access, infrastructure, credibility and resources uniquely position us to be better partners than we have ever been. We are doubling down in four key areas where we believe doing so will result in positive, material and sustainable change:

1. FEED – All people have reliable access to a nutritious mix of food. We are engaging technology and other resources to more quickly, more deeply and more equitably provide food to our food-insecure neighbors.

2. NOURISH – All people facing hunger have the support they need to make healthy choices. We are increasing the nutritional values of our offerings and providing nutrition training that raises awareness of the impact of those new choices on health and well-being, including preparation training and recipes.

3. EMPOWER – All people facing hunger have access to economic mobility pathways. We provide job skills training and employment pathways and support data-informed public policies known to support economic mobility and food security.

4. UNITE – People take action to end hunger. We work to create bigger tables and more chairs with people facing hunger at the center and with a critical and influential seat, joined by partners across the spectrum of public, private and philanthropic partnerships working toward our vision of an America where no one is hungry.

Will you discuss the impact that COVID-19 has placed on the issue of hunger in America?

Tens of millions of people in our country have long struggled with hunger. COVID-19 has shone a bright light on the challenges that so many face. It has also made clear just how close many of us are to waiting in one of those long lines. It made it easier for us to now ask: What if all income earners, or even one, in my home suddenly lost their job for reasons other than a pandemic? What if I lost everything that I earned in a hurricane, tornado or wildfire? What if medical expenses outpaced my income? What if I suddenly had no access to childcare, so I couldn't take that job that I really wanted or had to leave one that I really love? These questions have become easier to process with empathy because of the pandemic. Maybe that newfound empathy will be channeled into actions. The good news is that we've seen so many more people do just that, but there's more work to be done.

How did Feeding America adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the pandemic and how proud are you to see the resilience of your team during this unprecedented time?



Claire Babineaux-Fontenot volunteers in south Louisiana after Hurricane Ida

The Feeding America network has a long history of rising to crises, like natural disasters, but never in our history have we been called upon to respond to such a widespread and enduring crisis as this pandemic. I am unapologetic in my pride for our network at the national offices, at food banks and across our remarkable partner organizations. We've collectively shown such resilience and innovation. To stand in community with people facing hunger despite the personal risks from the very start of the pandemic to today, after standing with them since the very first food bank was created by our founder so many decades ago, is something to behold. To do so, when demand increases practically overnight by 70 percent, is something to laud and respect – I know that I do.

Food banks adapted their operating models almost overnight to provide a safe environment for our volunteers, staff and our neighbors facing hunger. Most noticeably, you saw drive-through distributions, which were the most efficient and safest ways to get food to people in need. Food banks also piloted home-delivery programs that drop off food boxes to seniors and families that could not attend a food distribution. Many food banks embraced technology as a way to reach more neighbors in need, providing an online ordering system where they could schedule a pickup at a convenient time and location. You will remember from my earlier response that together, we distributed a record 6.6 billion meals last fiscal year, the most we had ever distributed as a network. This unprecedented feat was accomplished against unprecedented difficulties.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your leadership style?

Others are the better arbiters of whether my approach is effective, but I can certainly speak to what I'm attempting to do and how I'm attempting to do it. I suppose it can be summarized into:

1. Care – People are strikingly good at sensing what other people believe in or, said differently, they can tell when you are being authentic.

Care for the People – Have you ever met a person who was a people leader and thought, "I don't really think that he likes people very much?" I know that I have. When contemplating my own path to people leadership, advising others who aspire to it or deciding whether to promote or hire someone into it, I ask that fundamental question, "do they care about people?" There will be moments when things that are happening in the lives of team members are and should be more important to them than the work assignments they've been given. If that's difficult for you to conceive or accommodate, don't lead humans.

Care for the Work – It's been my practice to engage in work that I truly care about – choosing an organization whose mission speaks to you, as I have with Feeding America, is only one way to do that. I've also found authentic inspiration to work in companies or disciplines because I had a unique opportunity to provide a diverse perspective or I thought others with a passion for the area would feel more confident in pursuing it because I provided an example of someone who was successful in the space and came from a similar background (e.g., first generation high school/college/law school graduate,

woman in leadership, person of color in leadership, HBCU graduate in a position of influence, etc.).

2. Serve – How I define my job description has not changed since 1989 when I got my first job. It is when I got "a clue" about how to thrive in them. My longtime job description is to lend whatever resources I have to the organization in which I have the privilege to serve. That means that, while I am certainly not competent to do every job, no job in my organization is beneath me. Importantly, it also means that it is my responsibility to serve the team and to adopt an enterprise view.

3. Count – It has been said that "one moves what one measures." My experiences have taught me that such is absolutely true. I came to Feeding America from a role as a finance executive. I've joined a team that is purpose-driven and highly sophisticated in finance. We've made a number of critically important decisions, a shift toward an outcomes framework is chief among them. We are holding ourselves accountable to be a part of moving metrics that matter to the ultimate arbiters of our success – people facing hunger. We've mapped out a Vision, a Mission, a Strategy, Priorities, Incentives and Dashboards to monitor progress and decide when mid-course corrections are necessary.

Did you always know that you were attracted to this type of work and that this was your passion?

While my path may not always have been clear to me, I believe that all of my experiences led to this place. I am fortunate to have been raised by parents who possessed an extraordinary capacity for love and generosity. Over the course of their lives, they raised 108 children who came into my family through biology, foster care and adoption. Most of my brothers and sisters became members of our family after experiencing some form of neglect or abuse, and most of them suffered from hunger. Until they joined my great big family, that is. I witnessed the restorative power that food had on their bodies and spirits. In this role, I have come full circle and returned to a cause that was so familiar to me as a child.

How do you measure success of Feeding America's work and how important is it for the organization to take moments to celebrate the wins?

Our success will be measured by our partners who live with food insecurity and the positive, sustained and tangible impact on their lives. Success won't come swiftly or easily because there is no quick answer to a problem as complex as hunger. It will be important for us to celebrate the moments and milestones we reach on our journey to an America where no one is hungry.

My hope is that we build on the momentum we've begun and the lessons we've learned from the pandemic to meaningfully address hunger in America. We have an awareness now, and we have a desire, and I know that we have the resources. If we can match up all three of those, we'll get to real, lasting solutions. ●