

Testimony to the Arlington County Board, March 22, 2011

Good evening, I am Charles Meng, Executive Director of the Arlington Food Assistance Center, thank you for this opportunity to address the Board as it considers funding for AFAC. I especially want to thank the Department of Human Services for their great work and for the real spirit of cooperation that exists between our two organizations.

AFAC's mission is to provide nutritious, supplemental groceries to our Arlington "neighbors in need." With the help of our many volunteers, we strive to do this in a manner that respects the dignity of all those who seek our services.

To do this, AFAC has an annual budget in FY 2011 of slightly over \$5.1 million. This is made up of:

- a cash budget of \$1.7 Million most of which is privately raised.
- donated food valued at \$2.8 Million - that is almost 2 million pounds.
- donated Volunteer hours equivalent to more than \$500,000 (26,000 hours)

Of this amount the County generously provides \$359,530 or 7.02 % of the total.

During the month of February, 2011 AFAC served an average of 1404 families - our highest average number served in one month since our founding 23 years ago. These families are made up of nearly 3,900 individuals - one-third of whom are children under the age of 18 and 249 are the elderly residing in low income senior living facilities. And, as you know, all of our families are residents of Arlington County.

The second important fact about AFAC's families is that at any one time we have over 3,200 active referrals to us for our services. Currently only 1400 families are seeking our services. However, as the cost of food and especially gasoline increases, the portion of these families seeking our services is expected to increase. This is why, even with low unemployment, our numbers continue to increase. Those especially hard hit are the families in the lowest income brackets - the unemployed, the under-employed and the elderly.

Over the last five years, our client numbers have increased from 14,142 in FY 06 to 62,692 family visits in FY 10. This is a 5 year growth of over 343%. Our expectation is that the number of family visits will increase to over 75,000 in FY 11. However, through the great generosity of County residents, businesses, schools and congregations we have been able to serve the residents of our County without resorting to a wait list or like so many other food pantries across this nation, stop serving for lack of food.

AFAC has made a request to the County through DHS to increase the current funding from \$359,530 (of which \$20,000 is CDBG funding) to \$385,400. Currently, and in the future all of these funds will be dedicated to the purchase of healthy, nutritious food supplies - milk, eggs and chicken. Although food prices are increasing, though bulk purchase agreements with several National suppliers we have been able to secure extremely good pricing so that what you or I can buy for a dollar, AFAC can buy for half the cost.

I am also proud to say that with an overhead cost of just 7%, 93 cents of every dollar we receive goes directly to our program.

Through the great generosity of the many volunteers who help out, and the schools, businesses, congregations and individuals who run food drives for AFAC and donate funds to us, we have been able, not only to keep up with demand but to extend our services to several under-served populations in the County.

This year, we opened two new distribution sites at Claridge House in the Crystal City area and Hunter Park in the Cherrydale. Before the County ended funding of the bus service that brought residents of Claridge House to AFAC to pickup their food, we had 59 residents of that facility as clients. Since starting the distribution at Claridge House, the number of clients we serve has risen to 108. There are another 59 clients at Hunter Park. If all goes as planned, we intend to extend our services to the two remaining low-income senior living facilities in the County.

In addition, we began a pilot program at Drew Model School that provides food for "homeless" children enrolled in the school who do not have sufficient food resources during weekend and long holiday breaks. The food is used to fill backpacks which are given to students on Friday afternoons and returned on Monday, renewing the process the next Friday. Over the next few weeks, I will be meeting with the Public Elementary School principals to introduce the program to them so that it can be extended to their schools and ultimately to all of the Arlington County Public Schools.

AFAC is also supporting other non-profits throughout the County that are in need of low cost food supplies. We are now providing microwaveable meals for the clients of A-SPAN and SEEC. We are also supporting the Arlington Assembly of God's evening meal program which serves over 100 individuals, 5 nights a week and the Ballston United Methodist Church and their breakfast for the homeless program.

For the first time, AFAC has on staff a nutritionist and is actively seeking to gain donations of more nutritious items including low sodium and low sugar foods. We are also striving to increase the supply of healthy fresh vegetables and fruit through our Plot Against Hunger program and building better relations with local produce suppliers, farms and farmer's markets.

Although the work of AFAC does not seem to end, our Board of Directors, staff, supporters and our many volunteers are dedicated to our mission of serving the very needy in our community. For the above reasons, I am requesting that full funding of our proposal be granted by the County.

This is truly a ***“Successful Public Private Partnership”*** of which we can all be proud.

In advance, I want to thank you for your support in the past year and in the future.

Charles Meng
Executive Director, AFAC