Soup Kitchens

As I am writing this column for Cereal Foods World, I can hear in the background the voice of a radio newscaster. She is saying that there are less than 2 weeks before the start of the hurricane season, which begins officially on June 1. Government scientists expect another very active storm season but stop short of making predictions of hurricane damage (4). By the time you read my column, the 2006 hurricane season will be history, but its lingering effects will remind us once again of the importance of disaster relief. The food industry plays a key role in providing disaster relief. Foremost among the needs of victims is a reliable and safe supply of food. Provisions are distributed as circumstances permit, but inevitably, soup kitchens are needed to feed displaced persons. Soup kitchens are not only a fixture of disaster relief, but day in day out, take care of the poor with compassion and commitment.

Regardless of hurricanes and other natural disasters, the needs of the poor are ongoing. Chief among these needs is food, in terms of quantity and quality. Many social programs, including food stamps and school lunch programs, are in place to assist the needy. Soup kitchens however, are possibly the most visible example of aid to the poor. This is an institution that not only feeds hungry people but demonstrates to them that others deeply care about their welfare.

Needs of the Poor

Statistics about the poor are quite alarming. In the United States, one of the wealthier countries of the world, the USDA reported that in the year 2003, 33 million Americans were food insecure (10). This condition means that these people do not know if they are able to buy food for themselves or their families. The Census Bureau explained that for the first time in a decade, the number of people living in poverty had grown and that real earnings had declined for the average American worker.

On the world scene, the numbers are even more discouraging. An estimated 840 million people in 2003 were chronically undernourished. Most of them, numbering 799 million, were in developing countries (17). The others were found in states undergoing transition, notably those in Eastern Europe. As bad as these figures seem, some improvement was noted. In spite of rapid population growth, there was a slight decline in the absolute number of hungry people. Unfortunately, progress remains spotty and slow. The internationally established target of halving the number of hungry people had declined for the average American worker. The Census Bureau explained that food insecurity had declined for the average American worker.

The plight of the poor has not been lost on the conscience of the world. The World Food Program (WFP), an agency of the United Nations, is dedicated to bettering the lot of undernourished people. WFP functions by coming to the rescue of individuals through emergency operations as well as by removing root causes of hunger throughout the world.

The success of WFP and other similar programs is dependent on commitments by professional experts. The International Union of Food Science and Technology has fostered the international cooperation and exchange of information among food scientists (1). By sponsoring its World Congress on a continuing basis, this institution has been extremely helpful in stressing the interdependence of food suppliers everywhere.

Recognition is given to those professionals who have excelled in solving world food problems. The World Food Prize, sometimes called the “Nobel Prize for Food,” is awarded annually to the person who has made the greatest contribution in this endeavor (12). The winner in 2005 was scientist Modadugu V. Gupta for his work in developing low-cost fish farming in Asia and Africa (2).

Second Harvest

All efforts to alleviate hunger would be meaningless unless they were supported by organizational skills. Herein lies the importance of an association known as Second Harvest. The name is more than a catchy phrase. In olden times, the poor would be allowed to glean the fields to scavenge overlooked produce. In its modern connotation, Second Harvest applies to making use of discarded or surplus food (7). Formed in 1979, America’s Second Harvest was chartered to provide an outlet for the food and grocery industry to move unsalable or distressed but still edible food. Today, the organization provides food to an estimated 25 million people annually through more than 200 food banks across the United States. Sixty-two regular corporate donors contribute produce to this effort (11). Second Harvest is a virtual business without any warehouses or trucks of its own. Rather, it operates as a clearinghouse by coordinating shipments using facilities already available. A significant achievement of Second Harvest is providing an umbrella for principals in the food industry. This protection limits the liability of participants. Food processors and distributors feel confident that they can contribute needed supplies without being subject to frivolous law suits. Under the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, companies are immune from criminal and civil liabilities as long as they act in good faith.

Many of the food banks receiving assistance from Second Harvest have limited capabilities. However, one in particular is a powerhouse. Known as the Greater Chicago Food Depository, its origin dates back to 1978 when firms from the Chicago Produce Market joined forces to handle their surpluses (18). Currently, the depository distributes 40 million pounds of food a year to approximately 600 Chicago-area soup kitchens. This food bank is largely self-sufficient, relying on Second Harvest for only 11% of its supplies. Managed by an ex-Marine general, the depository is a model of efficiency. It is an excellent example of how effective a charitable organization can be when employing proven management methods.
The average person never gets a first-hand look at the workings of food assistance behind the scene. Instead, what the public sees is a vast network of food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters that depend on the regional food banks and local contributors for supplies. This network of service centers is manned by volunteers from more than 50,000 hunger relief charities. The better known organizations include Catholic Charities, the Red Cross, Meals on Wheels, the Salvation Army, and Neighbor to Neighbor. Their strength is the ability to meet the needs of a community (3). Intimate knowledge of local conditions is critical to the success of these ventures.

**Hurricane Katrina**

On August 29, 2005, the worst fears of New Orleans came to pass. Situated at the mouth of the Mississippi River, with many of its districts below sea level, the city was flooded when hurricane Katrina breached the levees that protected it (8). Save for a cadre of rescue workers and a few diehards, the entire population had to be evacuated to higher ground through a narrow corridor. Slowly at first, but then with determination, the whole country mobilized disaster relief of gigantic proportions. The emergency aid consisted of all the essentials for survival, including food, bottled water, and baby formula (6). Money was not an issue. What hindered relief work the most was the almost complete loss of infrastructure in the affected area (14). Practically everything that is taken for granted, including water supplies, electricity, communications, and transportation, was disrupted (5). The Gulf Coast from Alabama to Texas was equivalent to a war zone.

The lead organization in providing disaster relief was the American Red Cross. It swung into action with thousands of volunteers and over a billion dollars of donations. By the time the emergency was over, the Red Cross, in coordination with the Southern Baptist Convention, had served victims more than 27.4 million hot meals (9). In addition, the organization gave individuals debit cards with as much as $1,565 in emergency funds to buy essentials.

The role that the American Red Cross plays during emergencies as well as on a day-to-day basis is unique. This organization acts as a quasi government body. It has enjoyed the special status of a government charter for the past 100 years, and it is included in the government’s National Response Plan for catastrophes. In effect, it acts as a de facto arm of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This arrangement is consistent with Americans’ bent toward volunteerism.

Any operation as massive as the relief that followed hurricane Katrina can be expected to have its problems. Not surprisingly, investigations, including congressional hearings, have been held to assess the performance of the Red Cross. Reports by international Red Cross officials indicated that the American affiliation was inadequately prepared for the emergency and experienced glitches in the distribution of supplies (15). Regardless of how justified these findings may be, it is unfair to single out the Red Cross for criticism. Other reports disclosed, for example, that military meals ready-to-eat (MRE) rations were misappropriated and ended up for sale over the internet (16).

Lessons can be learned from any mishap. In providing assistance to the needy, whether through soup kitchens or other means, supply chain management is critical. Control over inventory is absolutely essential. In times of emergency, this function becomes even more challenging. Allowances must then be made for surges in demand (13). Whatever management systems are adopted, however, the human element must never be forgotten.

**References**


An advertisement appeared here in the printed version of the journal.