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SHIRLEY WATKINS INTERVIEW
NOVEMBER 15, 2000

00:00:17:04 Q: Today is November 15 of the year 2000. I'm Larry Quinn with the US Department of Agriculture's Office of Communications. And today we're talking with Shirley Watkins, the Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services.

00:00:31:11 And Undersecretary Watkins you've been at the Department of Agriculture for a few years. When did you first come here?

00:00:39:14 A: Larry, I came to the Department of Agriculture November 1, 1993. And I have remained at the Department of Agriculture since that time.

00:00:49:26 Q: What was your initial position here?

00:00:51:28 A: My initial position was Deputy Assistant Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services. And, of course, I moved over to Marketing and Regulatory Programs as the Acting Assistant Secretary until the confirmation of Mike Dunn who was named the Assistant Secretary.

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00:01:16:20 And then I assumed the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs. And that was in 1995. And then went back in 1997 as the confirmed Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services.

00:01:36:28 Q: So you covered a wide array of programs and missions in the Department.

00:01:41:27 A: I have and I think it's perhaps the first time that a political appointee has been asked to serve in those two capacities, which gave me a broad range of experience on the production agriculture side, as well as the human nutrition side.

00:02:03:25 Working in Marketing and Regulatory Programs, having the distinct pleasure of working with Animal, Plant Health Inspection Service, Agriculture Marketing Service and Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards gave me a greater appreciation for what happens in production agriculture.

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00:02:26:01 And then how do you take that knowledge and transfer that to what you do in Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services.

 And with that experience, I have been able to foster a much better working relationship with all four agencies that we work with and that has been an enormous opportunity for us in Food, Nutrition and Consumer Service in my current capacity.

00:02:56:24 Q: But the human nutritionary probably is your favorite? As I remember, you were an official in Tennessee in nutrition programs. What was that work that you did?

00:03:07:07 A: Well, I was the Director of Child Nutrition Programs for Memphis City Schools, feeding about 110,000 children every day, both for lunch and breakfast. Serving about 15,000 children for breakfast every day, and providing a very creative nutrition education program to children in that school system as well as for their parents and working with the University of Tennessee Med School.

00:03:42:27 And that was a wonderful opportunity for me. I didn't

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know at that time that that experience was going to help me in the position that I'm in now. So I am the first Undersecretary at the Department of Agriculture, thanks to Mike Espey (ph.), President Clinton and Secretary Dan Glickman for allowing me an opportunity to serve as the first person who has ever had direct management and leadership operating experience in a program to serve as an Undersecretary.

00:04:19:16 And that's been perhaps one of the most valuable experiences that I could have brought to this position.

00:04:29:16 Q: I expect you had some definite opinions about USDA and it's programs when you were back in the State.

00:04:35:05 A: Well, obviously having worked so closely with USDA on regulations and I can assure you we had lots and lots and lots of regulations. I assumed that position as Director in Memphis in 1979 and between '79 and '89, we had tons of regulations.

00:05:05:13 So it was a balancing act for me and for all of the

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people that worked with me trying to balance what we did in the way of regulations that sometimes were a strain hold, a noose around the neck of program administrators.

But never to lose the sight of why I was going to work everyday.

00:05:33:24 And that was to insure that children were fed and that children could succeed in the classroom. I never lost sight of that. So I brought that experience with me so that we could not only look at how we manage programs and how we make the programs so difficult that program administrators at the local and the state level have difficulty implementing that.

00:06:04:14 But I was very fortunate to have outstanding support from the Superintendent, from the School Board and from the community at large who agreed that the health of the children, that the nutritional well-being of children and their families should be my number one priority and work those regulations in as best I could.

00:06:27:07 But try not to make it so difficult for school

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administrators that they focus all of their time on my regulations versus teaching children and feeding children. And that was the balancing act that I played.

00:06:41:26 So bringing that kind of experience to the table when we get here to talk about policy and how you implement policy and what you do for people that would impact them in the human nutrition arena is a love of mine.

00:07:02:07 I found that quite fascinating because every day I could see that we were making a difference in the lives of children as to whether or not they could succeed, and a difference in the lives of families because we taught nutrition education.

00:07:15:15 And in teaching nutrition education those children could take that home to their parents. So we did have a direct impact on the lives of families in that community. And as the Superintendent told me when I visited with him, who now is the Mayor of Memphis, he said, "Shirley, I just wanna tell ya. I like broccoli. And thank you".

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00:07:39:04 So we did have an impact on a variety of people even if it's now the Mayor of that city. So the nutrition education was effective and the way we did it was through some fun and creative ways of not "this is what you ought to eat", "this is good for you", but helped make it fun and exciting.

00:07:56:06 And that's what we were struggling with and tried to do every day.

00:07:59:17 Q: So, obviously, you came with many guiding principles which probably put a lot of pressure on you from the beginning because you understood so well the meaning and importance in the mission of the programs you were managing here.

00:08:11:25 A: That's true. And then what I could do was to help the agency develop guiding principles for programs. And one of the programs that we thought we needed to work on guiding principles for was the Food Stamp Program which is our largest safety net in this country.

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00:08:31:29 We wanted to bring people back to the center to focus on why was that Food Stamp Program begun. Why was it necessary to start the Food Stamp Program? On what principles was that program established?

00:08:50:01 We wanted, since that was one of the federal nutrition programs that was prevented from being blocked grant--block granted, we wanted to make sure we protected that program and help people all over this country, our state partners, our local partners and the advocacy community, as well as at the federal level here at USDA in FNS, Food and Nutrition Services.

00:09:19:26 What is that program all about? So we developed guiding principles. We developed ten which help people to understand that that's through the Welfare Program. It is a nutrition assistance program that moves people to nutrition and a healthy well-being so they can...

00:09:41:24 And particularly for poor people in this country. So they're not shackled with some of the health-related

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problems. And, to me, if there's one thing that this administration accomplished, was to change the landscape of the Food Stamp Program by developing those guiding principles.

00:10:03:08 And that helped us to get people to focus on not that it's a Welfare Program, not that it's fraught with welfare, fraud and abuse, not what people are getting, but that it is a solid, nutrition program for poor people in this country that, in actuality, if we follow those guiding principles, will help us to eliminate long-term health risk for poor people.

00:10:33:06 That's why that program was begun. That's why the fathers of that program, George McGovern, Bob Dole, all of those people who fought so hard for that program, that's why we have such a strong Food Stamp Program.

00:10:53:02 So you're exactly right. Those guiding principles helped me to get everybody focused on why those programs are so successful. And we did that not only with the Food Stamp Program, but we wanted to do that with all of the

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nutrition assistance programs.

00:11:10:29 So we moved people from talking about these programs as food assistance to nutrition assistance. That's a major step for the Department of Agriculture. And thanks to this administration, we've been able to accomplish that and have people talking about programs in a different context.

00:11:30:01 For school meal programs, we wanted to bring quality to those programs. So from the very beginning of this administration in 1993, we looked at how you put quality on the table for every child. How do you do that? Then (unint.) helping those school meals program begin by following the dietary guidelines.

00:11:56:22 We had something called an analysis of what children were eating in this country and discovered that many children were getting most of their calories from fat and most often it was through the School Meals Program. Because for poor children, many of them eat that one meal a day at school whether its breakfast or lunch and that's the

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only meal they get during the day.

- 00:12:25:23 Well, obviously, if they're consuming that much fat in other food items that perhaps are categorized as non-nutritional, then we, perhaps, are doing some harm to children. So our focus the first two years of this administration was to develop a quality meal program for children.
- 00:12:48:22 So it was established with legislative efforts in that school meals must meet the dietary guidelines. That was major. So as we moved in that direction, then we wanted to make certain that the quality of the food that we're purchasing meets the dietary guidelines.
- 00:13:09:24 So what we're doing for commodity food purchases, a major change in rewriting those specifications. And we had something called a re-invention of commodity distribution which was a major effort working with (unint.) federal agencies.
- 00:13:28:06 Not only with the agencies within USDA, but also with FDA

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to insure that what we're providing was a good, quality product. That those specifications also met the dietary guidelines and that we were reducing the fat. That we were eliminating some of the high sugar content of products.

00:13:49:26 That we were looking at the quality of the ground beef so that food is safe. So that meant working with ad marketing services, food safety and inspect services, farm ag services, farm service agencies that's responsible for purchasing grain products and peanut butter and butter, dairy products.

00:14:21:22 So that meant all of us working together with FNS, that we could go in and revamp those specifications. But what else did that quality signal say? I worked with Native Americans for perhaps the first half of my year at the Department in '93, '94 and discovered, just as Native Americans said, that they felt those commodities that were being purchased were purchased to kill them.

00:14:53:07 And, obviously, there was a great deal of concern on

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reservations about the quality. We worked hard with and in cooperation with the Native American community to look at what they were getting, to determine what that quality was and rewrite those specifications.

00:15:16:03 And they looked at me and said, "We don't get fresh fruits and vegetables". And I went in a store on a reservation and found a lemon that had been there quite some time. It was dried. It was a horrible condition. That was the only fresh fruit or vegetable in that little store on that reservation.

00:15:40:18 And I came back and said, "What can we do?". We worked with the defense service, Department of Defense Installation in Philadelphia, and we were able to provide for Native Americans a fresh fruit pilot project just to see if it would work.

00:16:06:02 Obviously, there was a great deal of concern as to whether or not they even had storage space in the commodity offices and they didn't. They had little home freezers, the chest-type freezers. And that was quite a

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challenge. Of course, the staff said to me, "There's no way they can handle that so what you need to do is to go back and look at just getting them some potatoes and some apples or some oranges cause that's all they can handle".

00:16:34:15 And I said, "But that's not what they said to me". We were able to provide, on a pilot basis on two reservations, a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. So we now have fresh fruits and vegetables as a part of the commodity program going to those reservations.

00:16:55:28 And I am just so grateful that I had that opportunity. So that's another area of quality that we were able to go in to improve. And I guess I could think in terms of the quality of our day care programs and upgrading the quality of food that we have in our child and adult day care feeding programs.

00:17:21:02 And looking at the standards that we brought to the table and start looking at what are the kinds of things that we can do and (unint.) from a local prospective as I saw it, made a big difference in what we were able to do in those

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programs just focusing on quality, on nutrition and, I guess if I could add another, it would be customer service.

00:17:52:16 We do those customers out there want and what is it that we can do to help them?

00:17:57:26 Q: The World for Reformat came along and had some impact on the Food Stamps Program especially. Tell us a little bit about that.

00:18:06:06 A: Well, it had not only a great impact on the Food Stamp Program, but it impacted all of our programs. What we found in the Welfare Reform, and President Clinton said this when he signed the Welfare Reform Act, it's not perfect and we'll need to go back and make some changes.

00:18:30:27 But this is a start for us. And we agree. It was a start and it was the right thing for this administration to do. Was to change the landscape of the Welfare Program and Welfare Reform. And states worked diligently to put people to work and that was a good thing.

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00:18:51:18 But, by the same token, as they worked so hard on that, there was some misunderstanding about the welfare rules and what it did for the various programs. In all of that, the Food Stamp Program, because Welfare Program as we know it, is now a state administered program. It's a block granted program.

00:19:19:19 The Food Stamp Program was not block granted. That was the difference. Because in the wisdom of congress and in the wisdom of the President, they all said, "Hands off of the Food Stamp Program. That's not a welfare program and it's a federal program".

00:19:40:22 What happened was that people got confused. There were immigrants who didn't know whether or not they were still eligible for food stamps. There were poor working people who didn't know if they were still eligible for food stamps.

00:19:59:00 So what we saw was a dramatic decline from about 28 million participants down to currently about 17 and a

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half million people in the Food Stamp Program. The Food Stamp Program participants fell five times what the poverty rate was. So that's dramatic.

00:20:22:06 So it did have a dramatic impact on poor people in this country who were still eligible for food stamps, but did not know that they were eligible. It had a rippling effect on WIC, so people didn't know whether they were eligible for our Women, Infants and Children Supplemental Feeding Program.

00:20:41:18 It also had a different impact on School Meals Program because those children and families who may not have participated in the School Meals Program when their families were participating in the Food Stamp Program, because they did have the food stamp capability, were all of a sudden participating in the School Meals Program.

00:21:01:25 So we saw an increase in our School Meals Program and a decline in the other programs. So it did have a different kind of an impact. It had an impact on our child care. Child and Adult Day Care Feeding Programs.

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Because all of a sudden we had the two-tier program for child care which created a real problem.

00:21:26:08 We saw our family day care homes and child care facilities drop dramatically in some states. So then while we were pushing child care and the need for child care, then we see a dramatic decline because of the two-tier affect in child care. So we saw some rippling effects in our programs, the Nutrition Assistance Programs, that impacted us as a result of Welfare Reform.

00:21:56:08 But, I repeat, Welfare Reform was a good thing. But there were things that needed to be changed and as a result of that President Clinton made an announcement in July of 1999 in Baltimore that he was directing the Secretary of Agriculture to implement an educational initiative for the Food Stamp Program.

00:22:28:03 And exactly one month to the day the Secretary was able to announce an educational initiative that would help food stamp recipients or people who may be eligible for food stamps, would help them understand what they needed

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to do to apply.

00:22:50:24 We had wonderful materials that were developed, as well as developing a 1-800 number for food stamp recipients or people who thought their families or their relatives or advocacy community to call so they could get information on the food stamp program.

00:23:11:22 So good things came out as a result of that. And it's not typical that a federal agency would be able to get some information ready that quickly. But we responded to what President Clinton asked us to do. And a month's turn-around is almost unheard of in a federal agency with very little money.

00:23:32:25 We had very little money to do this. We had no money allocated in our appropriations for marketing these programs. So that was quite remarkable for the agency to be able to turn something that massive around and make it available to state so quickly.

00:23:53:00 Q: Couple of areas I want you to comment on. Education

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has been very much a theme for all of your efforts in nutrition as child education. Now I understand you're approaching some nutrition for aging information. And also you talked about it's uncharacteristic of federal programs for quick turn-around.

00:24:10:23 It's also uncharacteristic to have such a high acceptance by the public as the WIC Program was judged to be.

00:24:18:13 A: We were extremely pleased when we were asked by the Vice President, Vice President Gore, to participate in a survey that would capture what the customer's acceptability is of federal programs. And the program we chose was our Women, Infants and Children Supplemental Feeding Program.

00:24:44:04 And they would go out and sample people who were participating in the program to see whether or not that program was acceptable, and measured that against the acceptability of outstanding programs in corporate America like Federal Express and BMW and Cadillac that may have won outstanding customer service awards.

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00:25:07:13 And we were very pleased with the acceptance of that program. It was as high as Federal Express and BMW. We were in the 80% category and that was extremely high for a federal program. The only program that was higher than that was the Social Security Administration.

00:25:29:13 So we are quite excited about that and what that led us to do. We were so fascinated with that effort to find out whether or not customers like what you're doing and then what is it that you need to do to improve. How can you get more customer acceptance. How can you improve programs? How can you improve customer acceptability in programs?

00:25:54:16 Until we did the same thing for food stamp recipients, School Meals Program and we are waiting on the results from those two programs that will be announced by the National Performance Review Team. This is unheard of that you would go in and survey.

00:26:13:29 And, of course, the staff was not exactly excited that I

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would choose to go in and interview school children and their parents about the school meals program. Who likes the school lunch? You just get so much static on school lunch, but why not?

00:26:31:11 If there's something we're not doing, or quality, that we need to improve in the quality, we can pass that information on to school districts around this country. One of the things that we have to do is to make certain if we're gonna be stewards of the billions of dollars that we're responsible for.

00:26:52:06 When I accepted the Undersecretary's position, it was a 40 billion dollar operation. Now a 36 billion dollar operation because of the decline in the food stamp participation. But as a tax payer in this country, I want to make certain that my tax dollars are spent right.

00:27:11:11 I want it to go to the right people at the right time and that somebody is watching over that money. We have that responsibility as an agency. If quality is not at the

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top of our agenda and if we're not serving customers, then we are failing the American public and the people that we serve.

00:27:32:06 So it's important that you do that. So we were very pleased to participate in that and have also done the same thing with surveys for staff. A happy staff can provide good customer service and we want to make certain that the staff is happy too. So we do staff surveys as well.

00:27:53:05 And that, too, is something that's unheard of in the federal government. We're running this operation like a business. Thanks to President Clinton for the leadership that he and Vice President Gore have established, that we feel empowered to do these kinds of things.

00:28:12:16 And I think that's been one of the fun things about coming into this job. Having worked in Memphis in the school system, Federal Express kind of adopted that school system. So we had strategic planning and customer orientation and customer focus from Federal Express.

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00:28:35:01 So I brought that to the table and that's been wonderful to be able to bring that kind of experience and background and share it with the agency and let them use that as they see it.

00:28:47:18 Q: You've had some characters helping you sell this nutrition education, including some named chefs, Power Panther and some other tactics you've used. Tell us a little bit about how you've put a little jazz into the education process.

00:29:04:18 A: Well, I had someone to tell me once that you have to make things sexy. And I think that's used in the communications arena and the marketing arena. And if you're gonna sell something to kids and to adults alike, you need something to sell it.

00:29:22:29 As we worked beginning in '93, '94, '95 improving the quality of School Meals Program, we involved noted chefs around this country. When we developed various gardens on school campuses, we used a famous chef in California.

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We've used famous chefs all over this country to help us.

00:29:47:11 The Chefs Association, including the Culinary Institute of America, as well as the other organizations around the country, they've just been very, very supporting of us. We started out looking at Disney. Walt Disney helped us early on in the administration.

00:30:07:20 But those were Walt Disney characters and, of course, we could only use them for a one and a half/two year period and then we could no longer use those characters. So when we recognized we were in that dilemma, then we developed our own character at USDA with a trademark logo for an "Eat Smart, Play Hard" campaign and a new character called Power Panther that is going to be in the 2000 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, along with the other USDA characters, including Smokey Bear and Thermy (ph.) and Fight Back.

00:30:51:26 They'll all be there. I think that says a lot about our marketing strategies and the marketing campaign that

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we've put in place at USDA. And these are not things that we're doing that are partisan. These are things that have been put into the framework of USDA.

00:31:16:29 And we expect Power Panther to have the same long livelihood that Smokey Bear has. So I expect to see Power Panther for many, many, many years to come. And "Eat Smart, Play Hard", a major campaign effort.

00:31:36:16 We've also been successful in doing something else that's probably unheard of at USDA is some people have said to me, "We've looked at health and nutrition and well-being as a major focus for Nutrition Assistance Programs". That meant looking at what are some major health risks that could be prevented if we did a more effective job with the Nutrition Assistance Programs.

00:32:11:09 And one of the things that came to mind for us was obesity and childhood obesity. USDA had the first ever effort to raise the childhood obesity issue at the federal level. The Surgeon General came to USDA and joined Secretary Dan Glickman, Surgeon General David

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Satcher.

00:32:41:23 And Secretary Glickman said it's the first time that a surgeon general had ever come to USDA. We raised the awareness level of not only childhood obesity in this country, but obesity period in this country. And that issue now is a major agenda item for every health organization, as well as HHS.

00:33:09:15 In addition, we'd had an opportunity to revise the dietary guidelines twice and work on health people 20/10. When we started doing that and looking at that, we thought there are other issues. We've had some very successful symposium that involved not agriculture people and not just food and nutrition people, but people from the medical community, people from every walk of life who had some interest in childhood obesity.

00:33:41:07 And the other one that we followed on with at if we're really gonna look at this, then why do people eat what they eat. Major research developed in both of those areas. So we then started out looking at are there some

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other issues that impact our customers that we need to look at.

00:34:02:18 We kept hearing the question raised. The quality of meals, sure. You've raised that standard and you're saying that they have to meet the dietary guidelines, but, gee, children are eating everything under the sun and they are selling everything under the sun in schools.

00:34:20:17 So we had a conference on the school environment and what children are eating and how does this impact their educational environment. A major conference bringing people together from around the country.

00:34:38:08 And I think our strategy with the President's leadership, sit down and talk with a variety of people, hold town hall meetings, not just in Washington but all over this country, so you can find out what people are thinking and get the best minds together.

00:34:58:20 And that means bringing researchers in to talk about

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these issues. And that was critical in all of those symposiums that I just mentioned. And the other symposium that we thought was extremely critical as we talked about obesity over a year and a half period was what kind of real information are people getting.

00:35:27:05 And we brought, can you imagine, to the Department of Agriculture, all the diet gurus. Those people who have written diet books without any factual, science basis but selling millions of books and making millions of dollars at the risk of the general public's health.

00:35:54:03 This was a major piece for the Department of Agriculture to start focusing in that light. And the Secretary has pushed us to be sure that what we're doing is based on good science and that we're using the best minds to help us make policy decisions. So that's been pretty major.

00:36:17:26 In doing that, raised a lot of eyebrows. But we had more media to cover that one symposium than any other media event ever at the Department of Agriculture. So, clearly, nutrition is an issue and a high visible issue

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that is on the hearts and minds of everyone.

00:36:40:19 And with the programs that we administer, rightly so we should discuss that. I think what we've done is to set and lay the groundwork for what nutrition programs at the Department of Agriculture can be and can do from a policy standpoint and how you need to develop major policy that impact the lives of people.

00:37:06:24 And for us, in Nutrition Assistance Programs, it's largely poor people in this country. But if you would just think with these kinds of, as we say, seeds that are planted on these kinds of issues, we think that the major impact will be looking at what the health consequences can be when people eat the right foods.

00:37:39:25 What does that save in long-term health care costs? We currently are spending 250 billion dollars on health care costs related to the risks of obesity. Could we do a much better job of nutrition education? Beginning with our WIC program, through our School Meals Program, through our Child and Adult Day Care Feeding Programs,

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can we look at that across the board?

00:38:12:25 Can we coordinate the nutrition message so that you don't get a conflicting message? And that's something that this department has worked on across agencies to come up with a coordinated nutrition message. Obviously, that's a major move in this country to come up with a coordinated nutrition message.

00:38:36:06 Because it means coordinating that message with the advocacy community, the retail community, the Nutrition Assistance Programs, with the extension community, with the education community, elementary, secondary and also the college and university level. So that takes a lot of coordination. And we've been successful in pulling all those people together.

00:39:11:09 Q: You've had a lot of good partners in this work and certainly your background as having served as President of the American School Food Service Association, you have a lot of allies that have been out there helping you.

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- 00:39:24:04 A: Your exactly right. We've had a lot of help. Almost unheard of at the Department of Agriculture in Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services. We have an open-door policy and, again, I credit the leadership of our President saying to us, "Get out. Work with People".
- 00:39:44:18 I cannot begin to tell you the hundreds of partners that we have been able to mass around this country who are so willing to help us do what we need to do.
- 00:39:58:28 Whether it's in the school community, whether it's principals, whether it's superintendents, whether it's mayors, whether it's city council, whether it's governors, whether it's state legislators, whether it's the advocacy community, whether it's the food banking community, all of these people have come together to work with us.
- 00:40:23:18 And getting that common bond, even getting the different associations to come together to partner, is almost unheard of. Getting the Food Stamp Association to talk to the School Food Service Association people and the WIC

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association groups to come together to talk with the Public Health Association officials, that would meet with the soft drink people, so we could all sit down and talk about what's best for families in this country.

00:40:52:04 How do we resolve that? Even with people on the Hill sitting down with us saying, "This is what we like. This is what we don't like". Our goal is to be able to bring all people together to sit down and talk about the good of these programs for the betterment of the health and well-being of people.

00:41:15:00 And that's been so helpful. I just remember all of the roundtables that we had. In 1997, we were getting ready for child nutrition reauthorization and, for the first time in 20 years, President Clinton was able to send to congress a reauthorization bill for special nutrition programs.

00:41:40:13 We went around the country in two months and visited in hundreds of communities to find out what people wanted to see in those programs and how we could improve those

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programs. And he was able to send that to the Hill.

00:41:58:18 And by and large, every item that we presented was approved by congress, in addition to some others, and one of those that was... If I had to think about it now, I'd think about it as a miracle. We had only one negative vote in congress on that bill. One.

00:42:23:24 We were just ecstatic because what we got out of that was an afternoon snack program for children through age 18. And that helped in the education community where they had after-school programs that they could then provide an after-school snack for children. That's major.

00:42:47:13 In this environment-- in the environment in 1997, congress was not adding any new programs. So for us to get a new program with only one dissenting vote in congress, was like a miracle. So having all these partners working together in building that kind of coalition has been a tremendous help for the programs.

00:43:13:05 In addition to that, we have already begun looking at and

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positioning reauthorization for the Food Stamp Program which is in 2003. So that kind of planning has already gone on and it's the help and support of all of those grass-roots organizations that has been so critical in developing that.

00:43:39:12 We did something else. One of the things that we found is we went out and-- all those listening sessions, and that's what we called 'em, we had listening sessions all over the country. We had hunger tours all over the country just to find out from senior citizens what is it that is troubling to you about our programs.

00:43:58:15 How can we improve that? So between listening sessions and hunger tours and roundtables, I'd sit down in a community and talk to five people, as well as I would go and talk to 2,000 people. That was extremely powerful in getting firsthand what people's needs were and how we could come back and write those policies and programs for that.

00:44:26:20 It's tremendous. We had what were called "grass-roots

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organizations and those were roundtables. And we were able to pull together federal agencies across government cause we didn't have the answer to those questions for some of those grass-roots organizations.

00:44:47:25 But how can we help them access many of the programs that would help poor people-- poor, working people. And it's just amazing that we were able to have about 10 or 11 grass-roots organizational meetings around the country and pull together the likes of FEMA, Department of Energy, Department of Transportation, HUD, HHS, Social Security Administration.

00:45:17:22 We don't know all these folk, but the President said, "Call them together. Talk to people". And that's what we did and as a result of that, we have a 1-800 number and a web page that people can now go and access all of the programs that impact poor people in this country and figure out how can we get access to grants, how can we get access to the various programs, how can we pull all this together.

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00:45:45:01 And that may not be in the realm of what you would generally think as our responsibility, but our partners said they wanted some support and help. So we were able to do that. And I think that's why people come to us and say, "We need your help". And we say, "Here's what we can do. Here's what you can do", and see if we can't work together hand in hand.

00:46:12:13 Q: You've talked about a little bit on the other end of the spectrum from the obesity is the hungry. And you've done some very interesting things with hunger programs, community feeding programs, that sort of thing. Talk a little bit about that.

00:46:25:16 A: The Secretary stressed early on when he came to the Department of Agriculture that billions of pounds of food were being wasted in this country. And he was exactly right. We waste food in restaurants, in the manufacturing process. And we were able to pull together a food security initiative.

00:46:52:13 We developed materials for communities in developing food

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security initiatives. We have food security liaisons in every community, every state throughout this country. We worked with the gleaning and food recovery effort.

00:47:10:04 We worked with our partners in the Farm Services Agency to marshal their troops all over this country and find out where farmers had surplus foods in the farm or on the farm that may have been going to waste. And we were able to get food banks and soup kitchens to partner with those farms so that we could glean that food that was left over.

00:47:37:02 We established a partnership with the National Restaurant Association so that restaurants would take their food that was gleaned from a day's operation to food banks. We've helped in having all kinds of ways of getting people in communities to work together and help them understand who, in their community, they can partner with for a gleaning and food recovery, in addition to developing cookbooks and handbooks and resource materials for food banks and soup kitchens.

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00:48:15:00 It's just been very positive. What we found is that communities often times, while they're there together, just don't know who is in that community working on the same effort that they are working on. And that's why we thought it was important to have someone coordinating the hungry efforts.

00:48:38:16 We signed on with the World Hunger Organization, an effort to end hunger in this country by 2015. That's major. As other countries did around the world, at FNS we chose a vision statement and a mission statement that we would work to end hunger in supporting American agriculture.

00:49:12:06 In doing that, you need to look at a variety of ways that you can end hunger. Obviously, our major safety net in this country is the Food Stamp Program, so that's one reason why we push so hard on the educational initiative so people know that they're aware of that program.

00:49:30:22 Another piece that we got in the reauthorization of 1998 was an opportunity in '97-- excuse me, was an opportunity

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for us to implement a pilot program for breakfast offered to all children in a school system in six sites around the country and then determine whether or not those children getting a breakfast would impact whether or not they were succeeding in the classroom.

00:50:07:01 So that is another effort in our piece to end hunger. The other area where we found real problems was with our seniors. We have many seniors, as we found on the hunger tour, who were making a decision between whether or not they were gonna eat and whether or not they were gonna buy their prescription drugs.

00:50:34:09 And the prescription drugs that they purchased often times said to eat with food and then they had no food. We found that for many seniors in the rural area, no access to Meals on Wheels, we found this to be a tremendous problem.

00:50:58:06 We partnered with our friends at the Agency on Aging to see what could we do in getting more funding to strengthen that program. HHS administers the area on

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agings Meals on Wheels Program and all of the elderly feeding programs.

00:51:23:04 But we provide the monies. The monies are flow-through monies through FNS. We can't take that lightly. If our seniors are hungry in this country and that's a problem, then we have to look at other initiatives.

00:51:40:00 We've look at, and the President will be making the announcement in about a week, on a Senior Farmer's Market Coupon Program that will allow seniors the access to a coupon so they can go to the Farmer's Market. And that's another program that we've implemented.

00:52:05:10 One of the other things that we found with seniors who don't participate in the Food Stamp Program and only about 35% of the seniors participate in the Food Stamp Program because of the stigma that's attached to that program. They don't want to be perceived as being-- accepting a government handout.

00:52:26:21 That's why we think it's so critical that that program is

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perceived as a nutrition assistance program. We have implemented in this administration the Electronic Benefit Transfer Program so that seniors and our other food stamp recipients can use what looks like your cash card that you use at the bank and they use that at the grocery store.

00:52:57:10 So that's another innovation that we've been successful in getting implemented. And we have over 75% of our food stamp recipients now redeeming through the Electronic Benefit Transfer Card. That's major for seniors.

00:53:15:04 The other thing that we've been successful in doing as we work to eliminate hunger is so that seniors can apply when they go to apply for social security or SSI benefits, they can also apply for food stamps that way. That, too, takes away that stigma of going to that "Welfare Office" that they don't have to do.

00:53:38:02 So that's another creative thing that we've been able to do to eliminate hunger. Obviously, as the Bible says, "The poor will always be with us". But they don't have

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to be hungry. We should not allow a country as rich as this country, we should not allow people to go to bed hungry.

00:54:01:21 And I think, bottom line, that's what this President has wanted to insure that we did by raising the minimum wage so people can have an income that provides them what they need so they don't need the government handout. And that's what Welfare Reform was all about.

00:54:22:03 But you still have those problems and we just have to make sure that we can eliminate some of the stigma attached to the programs so people don't feel intimidated by applying for those programs.

00:54:35:15 Q: As we conclude our visit, any final reflections?

00:54:41:03 A: I guess I am so grateful that we had an administration that felt so strongly about working on behalf of people. That we could be creative and look for ways to help all people. That we could look for creative ways to bring customer service into a federal agency.

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That you could look at ways to develop a business model in a federal agency.

00:55:18:23 That you could help people understand that because you're a federal agency, you can do something than three years. It doesn't take three years to get it done. You can get it done over night. That you had talented people in the federal government to work with you.

00:55:35:20 That they are just incredibly talented people who bring a great deal to the table. That people are interested and concerned and dedicated to making the lives of people better. To have that kind of experience has been a wonderful opportunity.

00:56:04:18 I'm grateful that I was born in Hope, Arkansas, had an opportunity to work for a President who was born in Hope, Arkansas, had an opportunity to work for a Vice President who was born and raised in Tennessee and having worked in Tennessee. I feel in deep humility and honor that I was given this opportunity to make the lives of people better.

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00:56:35:13 Q: Thank you, Shirley Watkins, Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services. I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communications at the US Department of Agriculture in Washington.

END OF TAPE