

## Looking Back, Forging Forward

*End Hunger Connecticut! catches up with organization's first executive director ahead of 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary*



Photo: End Hunger CT's current team and Lucy P. Nolan (fourth in from left) during her visit to EHC!'s office in December 2021.

**East Hartford, Conn.** – End Hunger Connecticut! (EHC!), a statewide anti-hunger organization dedicated to eliminating hunger and food insecurity across Connecticut, turns 20 years-old in May. As the organization looks to honor its anniversary, current staff members sat down with Lucy P. Nolan – the nonprofit's very first executive director – to reflect on the past two decades.

EHC! began in 1999 as an advocacy coalition, aimed at impacting food system policy change on behalf of Connecticut's food banks and pantries. Foodshare, now part of CT Foodshare following a 2021 merger with Connecticut Food Bank, served as EHC!'s fiduciary until about 2000. Nolan was involved as a policy staff member during EHC!'s earliest operations.

Around 2001, EHC! officially became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and Nolan was appointed to serve as the first executive director under 501(c)(3) status. She led the organization for 16 and-a-half years before parting amicably to pursue policy work that led to her current position as Director of Policy and Public Relations at the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence.

"I absolutely loved it [working at EHC!]. Our board was great, our staff was great. It's making me teary thinking about it," Nolan said during EHC!'s interview. "I always felt that there were possibilities and things to do. And we had so much support nationally, locally, our congressional delegation backed us. We saw that we could really make a difference with this organization. Honestly, I would love to come back just to lobby!"

Some of EHC!'s earliest goals included: increasing the use of available, yet underused, government programs; advocating to move beyond just emergency food systems, like food banks, as the only priority; and digging into the root causes of hunger while building and supporting solutions that move people toward self-sufficiency, Nolan wrote in a 2017 award acceptance speech.

Nolan was deeply involved in advocating at both state and federal policy levels and coordinating efforts with legislators and communities alike to increase food and nutrition access. She recalls working closely with leaders like Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro (CT-03), who remains a fierce anti-hunger and food security champion for Connecticut.

"It is impossible to celebrate the legacy, hard work, and dedication of End Hunger Connecticut! without recognizing Lucy Nolan," Congresswoman DeLauro said. "Through Lucy's expertise and vision, End Hunger Connecticut! successfully advocated for a number of critical legislative initiatives including increased funding for the school breakfast program that established a pilot program for in-classroom breakfast and increased food stamp [SNAP] accessibility."

Nolan said EHC! was the first to do a lot of what she and her team accomplished during the organization's early years.

"Like the work we started with farmers' markets and farmers; we were the first to make those kinds of connections. I mean, at the time we were really the first hunger advocacy group to work with farmers as partners and collaborators in anti-hunger work," Nolan said.

Today, the input, participation, and partnership of farmers' markets and farmers remains integral in increasing nutrition access and pushing anti-hunger initiatives forward. EHC! continues its work with farmers through its CT Fresh Match program, a reimbursement program that enables farmers' markets and farmstands to double SNAP purchases. EHC! has plans to expand on its work with farmers in a new partnership with the Connecticut Department of Agriculture this coming season.

Nolan and EHC! staff also played a large role in coordinating the effort to bring a Witnesses to Hunger chapter to New Haven in 2008, a collaborative effort between EHC! and several other local organizations, according to [Drexel University Center for Hunger-Free Communities](#). Witnesses to Hunger brings together a nationwide network of parents that know firsthand how hunger impacts families. Through sharing photographs and stories, Witnesses use lived experience to affect lasting change on local, state, and national levels.

"I met Lucy when she reached out about starting a statewide Witnesses to Hunger project. She wanted to show that hunger existed in each county, town, and city in CT," said Kim Hart, Site Leader for Witnesses to Hunger CT. "We met once a month in Hartford with different organizations that represented people experiencing food insecurity and we found folks in all four corners of the state who were food insecure, and they documented their stories through photos. We presented our findings in the Legislative Office Building to policymakers."

Today, Witnesses to Hunger CT members continue to be heavily involved in local advocacy and community efforts to address hunger and poverty issues and advocate for families across the state, according to [Witnesses to Hunger CT](#).

"Since our first meeting, [Lucy and I] have been sisters-in-arms – kindred spirits – in the battle against hunger. From protecting SNAP benefits to growing the summer meals program to bringing the Witness to Hunger

event to New Haven, she has been the staunchest of advocates and always just a phone call away,” Congresswoman DeLauro said.

“Lucy’s tenure also saw End Hunger Connecticut! implement a very successful outreach program for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and create innovative partnerships with community leaders and community-based organizations that have strengthened community efforts to address hunger at its core,” the Congresswoman added.

EHC!’s SNAP Outreach program and its related partnerships have continued to expand throughout its 20 years. EHC! staff conduct targeted outreach to the community to educate residents about SNAP and EHC!’s Call Center services; dispel myths about the program; provide resources and trainings; present at community events; and cultivate strategic partnerships/collaborations.

The driving force behind EHC!’s SNAP efforts for over a decade has been EHC!’s SNAP Call Center, a free service for residents that operates 7 days a week with flexible appointments and availability to assist in English and Spanish. Its small, dedicated team aims to make the often-daunting task of applying for SNAP a more personalized and positive experience. Nolan was at the forefront of the Call Center’s inception.

Sherry Suber, EHC!’s current SNAP & Operations Director, who has been with the organization for over 10 years and has overseen the Call Center for much of that time, said the Call Center was born out of a successful 2011 pilot program with AARP. Soon after, EHC!’s Call Center was chosen to participate in a beta test as the Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) prepared to launch online modernization efforts to the SNAP application process.

“EHC!’s participation in the State’s SNAP pilot testing was extremely successful and we continue to run our Call Center and our outreach work through a contract with DSS,” Suber said. “We are grateful to the State for their partnership; we couldn’t do this work without them. And Lucy was a huge part of getting us here. Our Call Center is now going on about 10 years of service to Connecticut residents.”

Suber began her journey at EHC! as a SNAP outreach worker, eventually moving up to Program Manager under Nolan’s guidance, she said. But she is not the only longtime staff member that saw Nolan and EHC!’s beginnings in action. Maggie Chacón, a current EHC! Senior SNAP Call Center Associate, who has been with the organization for over 12 years, and Madeline Trinidad, a current EHC! SNAP Call Center Associate, who has been with the organization on and off since 2008 and became full-time in 2021, both recalled what it was like working alongside Nolan in EHC!’s early days:

"Lucy was great to work with," Chacon said. "She really kept EHC! running smoothly all those years. She did so much for EHC!, its staff, and Connecticut residents. "

“I had the pleasure to work with Lucy from the beginning of EHC!,” Trinidad said. “Lucy had and still has so much knowledge when it comes to legislative insight, from hunger insecurity to advocating for equality. I learned so much from her. She was always fair and welcomed any suggestions from her staff regarding programs.”

Jim Crawford, who currently serves as a Member on EHC!’s Board of Directors, was also past staff member hired during Lucy’s tenure. He served as an advocate for the School Breakfast and CT Summer Meals programs, bolstering awareness of and participation in crucial child nutrition programs across the state.

“Lucy nurtured a workplace culture featuring shared responsibilities, innovative leadership, mutual respect, and collegial support,” Crawford said.

Nolan reminisced on the organization’s achievements as the result of collaborative efforts from all staff members.

“All that EHC! accomplished is because of an extraordinary staff who worked with one another on our common goals. We had each other’s backs and no one was left on their own. We were a small but mighty team that got things done!” Nolan said. “Sally Mancini, Dawn Crayco, Shannon Yearwood, Gail Corso, and Sherry Suber were the backbone of EHC!.”

Perhaps Nolan’s greatest achievement with EHC!, she and others cited, was leading the efforts that resulted in [the passage of legislation](#) banning soda and sports drinks in schools statewide.

The legislation, entitled “An Act Concerning Healthy Foods and Beverages in Schools,” was a hard-fought victory that led to the ban of selling soda and sugary drinks (like Gatorade and Powerade) in all Connecticut schools in 2006. Further, it incentivized school districts by allowing them the option to opt into increasing their funding by an additional 10 cents per lunch served by agreeing to abide by Connecticut’s “Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools,” as developed by the Connecticut State Department of Education.

“A lot of kids get their meals at school, so we wanted to make sure the options were healthy,” Nolan said. “Schools need to be a place where students learn about good nutrition.”

The act was “the country’s toughest school nutrition legislation,” Congresswoman DeLauro said.

EHC! coordinated a strong coalition of supporters to work on the legislation which included the Connecticut Dental Association; the Connecticut Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics; Connecticut Dietetic Association; One Connecticut; teacher unions, and others.

I think winning the soda bill is one of my favorite things. It really was life-changing; I mean, even my kids were involved in it,” Nolan said.

Nolan said her son’s fifth grade class accompanied her to a press conference where she lined up soda bottles in front of them filled with white sugar, equated to the amount of sugar one would consume in each serving. It was a powerful and alarming demonstration of the amount of sugar many students could be consuming during their school day based on what was made available to them.

“And it was front page of the news, [the New York Times](#) picked it up; it was unbelievable. And it really was a hard-fought campaign. Coke and Pepsi went all out, even putting free soda machines in the caucus room. I mean, it was just crazy. But despite everything, we prevailed,” Nolan said.

Over the next decade and a half, EHC! would continue to be involved in policies that helped improve access to nutrition, including increasing funding for school meals; implementing in-school breakfast and supper programs; strengthening reach of the CT Summer Meals program; increasing SNAP assistance outreach, and endorsing legislation to protect and strengthen nutrition assistance across the state and nationwide.

“Over the years, EHC!’s focus unintentionally shifted to direct service work, and not for a lack of necessity. That piece is still needed and will continue,” Suber said. “But we have recently come full circle in taking our 20th anniversary to reflect on what we’ve done, and what we can do going forward to continue making a mark on hunger. I’m excited to have a team diving head-first into policy efforts that need to be done to reduce food insecurity in Connecticut.”

While EHC! has always advocated for anti-hunger initiatives and legislation, in 2022, the organization is focused on very intentional and innovative efforts to address and advocate for policy changes still needed to overcome hunger in the state.

“As we enter our 20th anniversary, I’m extremely excited for what’s in store for EHC! as we continue the push to eliminate hunger in Connecticut for all residents,” said Julieth Callejas, EHC!’s Interim Administrative Director. “I’m looking forward to seeing our current programs grow and moving into new ventures. In these last 20 years, we have really expanded our programs to be more focused and detailed to the needs of the community. We’re furthering our efforts by delving into more policy work and implementing some innovative solutions.”

When asked if she ever expected that EHC! would be celebrating a 20th anniversary when she started, Nolan said: “To tell you the truth, I don't know that I looked that forward. I mean, it doesn't surprise me, because I think there's still so much to do...I think a lot of the stigmas surrounding hunger and SNAP have improved [in the past 20 years], and the response to hunger has changed...but it took some arguments to get that done. Hunger is still here, the work is still needed, the issues are just different.”

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*End Hunger Connecticut! is a statewide anti-hunger and food security organization. By focusing on advocacy, outreach, education, and research, EHC! serves as a comprehensive anti-hunger resource for policymakers, community organizations, and low-income families. Our mission is to end hunger in Connecticut through legislative and administrative advocacy, outreach, and public education. EHC! is committed to providing and sustaining a culture of safety, offering clear expectations and a non-judgmental environment rooted in integrity, reliability, and generosity in the workplace. Learn more about EHC!’s work at [www.endhungerct.org](http://www.endhungerct.org) and on all social media platforms (@endhungerct).*

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