

By MELISSA KOSSLER DUTTON

+ Photo by JODI MILLER

Nonprofit

Healthy Margin

Children's Hunger Alliance bolsters mission with sound business practices.

Mary Lynn Foster understands that fighting childhood hunger is a cause that will easily pull on the community's heartstrings.

But since taking the helm at the Columbus-based Children's Hunger Alliance in 2013, she has looked for ways that sound business practices can help the nonprofit fulfill its mission of ensuring that hungry children have access to healthy food, nutrition education and physical activity.

"I have a favorite saying, 'If there's no margin, there's no mission to grow in the future,'" says Foster, who serves as president and CEO of the statewide organization.

Founded in 1970, the nonprofit works with the US Department of Agriculture to help provide healthy meals and snacks to children in after-school programs and in family

child-care programs. Fifteen of its 200 after-school meal sites are in the Columbus City Schools district.

Addressing childhood hunger makes a long-term difference in the lives of young people, Foster says.

"If a child can't concentrate because she is hungry, how can she learn? If she can't learn, how can she graduate? If she doesn't graduate, how can she get a job and contribute to our community?" she says. "Children in food-insecure households face elevated risks that negatively impact them and their future."

Many children receive help from CHA before they even start school. The organization works with over 1,000 child-care providers to ensure that at-risk children are eating nutritiously. Providing healthy foods to young children gives them a better foundation for starting school, Foster says.

"Preschool-aged children—and school-aged children—need consistent, nutritious food to develop properly and enter school ready to learn," she says.

The organization also works to expand the federal school breakfast program, another critical piece to helping children succeed, Foster says. Studies show that eating breakfast improves test scores and gives children the nutritional boost they need to "jumpstart the learning process," she says.

CHA regularly partners with Columbus City Schools to help find ways to encourage more students to take advantage of the free breakfast program, says Joseph Brown, director of food services for the district. CHA has helped the district secure grants to purchase equipment that allows schools to serve breakfast to kids in the lobby when they arrive at school or to deliver it to classrooms. Making breakfast more convenient increases participation, Brown says.

"They work with us constantly to find different ways to bring resources, experiences and money to grow our child nutrition program to feed more children in our district," he says.

In recent years, CHA has looked



Children's Hunger Alliance and CEO Mary Lynn Foster at Weinland Park Elementary School.

for partners to help provide food to children during the summer. Families whose children receive free and reduced-price lunches during the school year often struggle to feed their kids during the summer, Foster says. Federal reimbursements are available to organizations willing to provide nutritious meals to children when school is not in session. Currently, only 7 percent of eligible students have access to summer meals.

The Columbus Parks and Recreation Department is committed to increasing access to the food program and appreciates the opportunity to work with CHA to make it happen, says Director Tony Collins.

"Children need to have access to the basic things," he says. "We need to do whatever we can to attack the barriers to access."

Another key project Foster, a certified public accountant, has focused on since coming to the agency is adopting a strategic plan for CHA. She led her staff and board through a SWOT analysis. The process, which attracted pro bono assistance from Professor Tony Rucci and some of his graduate students at Ohio State

Children's Hunger Alliance

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Childrenshungeralliance.org

Ensures children are fed regular, nutritious meals. In 2014, CHA fed an average of 24,000 Ohio children monthly through 1,200 childcare providers and 200 after-school sites and educated 1,300 children on healthy diets and physical activity.

TOP OFFICER: Mary Lynn Foster, president and CEO

EMPLOYEES: 60 FTE; 15,500 volunteer hours (2014)

2015 OPERATING BUDGET: \$14.2 million



University's Fisher College of Business, was well-received by the organization's staff members and governing board. The plan not only outlines goals, it addresses what tactics will be used to accomplish them. It also provides tools for evaluating the agency's success.

"It's identifying a road map—it's really identifying and knowing where you're going and what your goals are," Foster says. "If you don't have one, how can you fulfill your mission?"

Foster also spearheaded efforts to relocate the CHA headquarters from an older Downtown location to remodeled space in an office building on Schrock Road. When she arrived at the organization, staff members were working on three different floors of the building—including the basement. The old space had no kitchen or informal meeting space, she says.

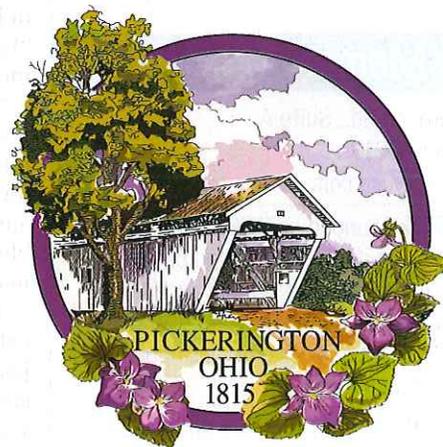
"The (new) space is much more conducive to collaboration—not just between team members but across teams, which often is where the most creative ideas come from," she says.

Melissa Kossler Dutton is a freelance writer.

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