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Melissa Campbell and John Dupre - Covid 19 Oral History Project

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John Dupre and Melissa Campbell Covid Oral History



During 2022 the Child Nutrition Archives conducted multiple interviews investigating how child nutrition professionals dealt with the Covid 19 pandemic and its effects on the operations of school feeding programs. This interview examines the response of the Louisiana Department of Education Child Nutrition Programs.

I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is January 21, 2022. I'm in Mississippi today talking with John Dupre and Melissa Campbell in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Welcome you all, and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

John Dupre

Good to be here.

Melissa Campbell

Thank you for having us. We are very excited about it. I've seen the ICN Oral History Project throughout the years and I've always thought it was very interesting, and I'm so glad that somebody captured that information for the child nutrition programs.

Jeffrey Boyce

So nice to hear that. That's been the favorite part of my job, since 2006. I've been doing it since then, since 2006, when I took over. I don't recall exactly how many they had when I started, but it was I would say, less than 50, and we have over 250 now. In fact I've been to Baton Rouge twice and New Orleans. We did something similar to this Covid project when we did a Katrina project.

Jeffrey Boyce

I'm going to let each of you introduce yourself tell me a little bit about yourself and what your job is.

Melissa Campbell

Okay, do you want to go first?

John Dupre

My name is John Dupre and I am very Cajun. I grew up in a place called Plaisance, Louisiana, about an hour north of Lafayette, Louisiana, kind of the central part of the state. From the Gulf you go straight up and you get to a place where when I grew up, people still spoke only French. I grew up speaking French in the sweet potato fields as a child working, doing the old historical thing. My father was a World War II veteran.

It's just an amazing history of people and culture and food oriented. I was a farmer for a while. I raised cattle, I did a lot of different things before I went to college and became a dietitian, at one time a registered dietitian.

Then I went to graduate school in Baton Rouge, ran LSU Food Services for a few years, came to the State Department of Education to become the state director for child nutrition programs at the age of 30, and I've been here ever since. I worked 25 years. I've been the state director for child nutrition programs in Louisiana for almost 25 years.

And it's been fantastic because the job is never boring. I always said I never wanted to come to work every day and recreate the last day.

And it's never happened yet, and so that's the amazing part of these programs and working with the needs of the people throughout the state, no matter what,

even though the cycle, the program repeats itself every year, or the programs, nothing's ever the same and the needs and the challenges always vary and it requires all of your knowledge, your history, and your creativity to figure out how to best serve those in need. And I'm a big proponent of serving those unserved and my concern is that no matter what we do through these programs, the poorest of the poor still get untouched in so many areas because of the challenges and difficulties getting to them.

So I'm one of those persons that it's wonderful to see the numbers and the statistics we can produce. But I want to see the faces and the names of those truly in need getting the services they need, and that's where the local communities are the only ones that, in my opinion, can truly help us get to all those in need, because they're the ones who can say the names and the locations of the people who they know are in desperate need, those who sometimes are afraid to reach out for help, afraid to ask for help, because they think maybe negative things or consequences will happen because of that, so I know I'm talking a bit on, but it's a fantastic job to have and it's fulfilling and challenging and everything you can ask if you really want to be in service and work with nutrition programs.

Jeffrey Boyce

That's great to hear. I can really tell you love your job and that makes a big difference.

John Dupre

Yes sir, absolutely.

Melissa Campbell

It does. And I'm Melissa Campbell, and I have worked for the Louisiana Department of Education, and scarily for 20 years. Twenty years have gone by. I love school food service but I fell into it very much accidentally. I was a graduate student at LSU in dietetics with several other graduate students, many others, and all of the dietetic graduate students were told that they would have these great projects to do with rats, rat studies in nutrition. Well they ran out of rats. There were no more rats, and so I didn't have a rat project, but I had a wonderful

mentor and major professor, who I know y'all know, Dr. Nina Cross, Evelynna Cross.

Jeffrey Boyce

I love Nina Cross.

John Dupre

Outstanding mentor.

Melissa Campbell

We both went to LSU at separate times, and she's been mentors to both of us, but she was my major professor and she said, "Melissa do you want to do something with menus maybe for school food service?" And I had no idea what that entailed, I didn't know anything about school food service as a graduate student. I was a recent undergraduate in dietetics and I just received my degree in that. I had an idea of dietetics being working in a hospital as a dietitian.

And so Dr. Cross introduced me, hooked me up with some of the people who work here. John was brand new, I believe, at that time. This was in the late 90s, I'm at this job as a graduate student, and my thesis project was creating a set of cycle menus for child attrition programs to use in the State of Louisiana that followed the regulations that were in place at that time. And I enjoyed it so much that I remember, John and I laugh about this, but when I was finished, I told him I wanted him to hire me, very boldly because I was you know 20 and was just inexperienced, and had no filter, as you develop as a professional, but I told him I wanted him to hire me.

And he could not because I did not have any experience yet, and there were some State requirements.

And he told me to come back when I had those minimum years of experience met, which was about two I believe, and I marched myself back in there when I had that and demanded to be hired. And John was nice enough to overlook my cocky behavior and everything and hired me and I've been here ever since.

Jeffrey Boyce

Oh, what a great story. Can I get you all to tell me about your experiences with Covid 19 and what challenges you faced?

Melissa Campbell

Sure.

John Dupre

The biggest shock was walking into the State Agency and it looked like you see things in movies, people running with shopping baskets with computers, like the state was being raided and they were running off with the state goods, because people were getting word of the gravity of what was about to happen in some areas, and in panic, the staff were just running home with their whole computer setup.

And I remember walking in and looking at everyone thinking my God, this is, you know, something I could have never imagined in my life. Because my father was a World War II veteran, I feared that someday we might see a nuclear war or something in my lifetime.

But I never dreamed this kind of thing could shut the world down, literally shut the world down for the most part. And so that was the biggest shock to start, and to see the panic, because I was, again, I guess, because of the way I was raised in my father and my mother's experiences I was more rationalizing what can happen, and knowing, because we have medical backgrounds in viruses, because they said it on the radio you're going to catch it right now.

So I was thinking about all the logistics and the things. I did watch the fear in people and the terror that you saw in some people's eyes that I have to get home now, like this second. And the one thing I knew, we're not prepared, so it took us about a week, not to prepare, but just to get our heads around what's the start of a plan just for our office staff to work away from the building completely.

And so that was the biggest challenge initially just to say what do you do internally to manage the people, the fears, the operation that you're not set up for.

And so we took a leap that I think probably pushed us 30 years into the future of communications, at least 30 years, for communication styles that we're doing

with Zoom and the teams and everything else. But that was the biggest right off the bat shot. The second thing comes in, when the districts started contemplating, how can we open, can we continue to run, do you have to shut everything down, listening to our state governors announcements and updates and when we started shutting everything down slowly but rapidly. What I mean is it happened quickly, but you could see it unfolding.

Melissa Campbell

Our state governor, I remember his press conference, right at the beginning of that time, one of the things that he said was that school meals programs, school feeding programs, he urged them to continue. He said that in the press conference, specifically mentioned school feeding program. So at that point, it really made it clear to us and to our child nutrition programs, that this is an urgent need. But we went from for years the school lunch program running as a school based or a location based feeding program feeding children on site, a breakfast and lunch typically, a day, to changing to a community feeding program almost. It completely changed, and with that change in mission almost, it necessitated a lot of operational changes that had never been done before.

John Dupre

If you can imagine the gravity of the situation, because it's, realistically it's their schools and education systems and all these things that are shutting down. Well that's one level, but everyone's going home. The kids are going to go home.

There was never in my lifetime and maybe the history of the school education system, never a time where all kids have to go back home, and everyone in the state, for an unknown period. We didn't know will this be permanent.

No one knew anything. So all of a sudden now, the same things that were going through my mind with my staff and everything internal, is going what would families do? Because it's not about a few kids going home, a school shut down for a couple of weeks with the hurricane till they figure out how to either open the schools or reassign the kids to schools.

We thought 'Can all these families maintain their own children long term in the house without the support that has become so normal every day in the lives of everyone?'

Which is not only the children being in a safe place getting care and all these other things they receive, but just the rations, the food supply every day, that is made available through the education system and the child care system. The second big hello point or major 'what do we do?' point is the families. Can everyone really - are they prepared for this, because it's not something they ever did. And some families had lots of kids, some of their own, sometimes other people living with them, every situation imaginable of people keeping kids in the home.

So how do they deal with this and how do they continue to care for those kids, so that's the major, major second problem, which then brought in how do schools, because they're the only ones who have the infrastructure to truly support that number of kids, and they touched those community lives and they know who they are, where they are, etc., how did they become exactly what Melissa said? How do they become a community feeding organization, rather than just the institutional food service they were before?

And so it becomes right to what she said about how does that happen, what does that look like, and all those pieces? PPE. I took so many calls for personal protective equipment from all over. Where do we get it from, how we get it, and just all those things, anything and everything imaginable?

Jeffrey Boyce

Well, how did you start addressing some of these issues?

John Dupre

When the call came in to start with, we came in seven days a week, some of us. So instead of going home we came in. I always said it was safer in the office because there was nobody here hardly, so it was a good place to be to work and because it was really, it was a person like every so often and the handful of people in the whole major state building; we had eight agencies in the one building.

So we took calls and we started with everyone telling us their situation because initially the concern wasn't the supply chain of food.

It was who can safely serve kids? Do I have employees? Do I expose my employees? All those questions came. Really we could not tell people how to fix it.

All we could do is listen to people tell us what they were struggling with and give feedback to them on possibilities.

Melissa Campbell

Right. One of the big issues was that every school system has some uniqueness to it, so we couldn't do a one size fits all plan that would accommodate every unique situation. Every school system that was able to feed children had to figure out how they could do this operation in a way that would benefit them. I mean there were so many challenges.

Their whole operation was set up, as we said, for an onsite feeding program of mostly hot food to their customers daily. So all of a sudden you had these menus that were planned months in advance that were playing based around foods that were easily in a cafeteria setting being able to maintain temperature controls. How do we get them to either take the ingredients that we have on hand or the ingredients that we're able to quickly purchase and change that into a menu that allows for transport, allows for packaging? School systems had to work out their logistics.

How do you get the supplies you need to do this? How do we get boxes?

How do we keep track, because we still want to maintain some level of accountability? We're stewards of these federal funds.

So we have to have logistics of how we're going to maintain some record of the meals that are being served because we still have some degree of accountability that roughly the meals are going to those children, and people aren't getting duplicate meals and things like that. PPE and safety, that's the safety thing.

And not just with PPE, because that was a whole thing. How do we get food transported, handled, and stored safely? How do we use PPE? Recommendations kept changing in terms of what is considered safe.

John Dupre

And you know we're in a situation where you're violating pretty much any and every rule or standard or process or procedure that's out there.

The waivers came and we start running programs that're not supposed to run. You violate so many rules, and this is what's supposed to be there. And you know, I guess I'm kind of telling a tale on myself, but we sat in rooms where we had conference calls statewide. And our state superintendent had just retired.

So we had an acting state superintendent, and we sat in conference rooms, tons of us from every area, and we sat up to the walls, and she went through everything listening to questions and pretty much everything that was asked of child nutrition, she'd look at me and I'd say, "Yes," even though I knew that some of it at some other time was probably, "No," I was not going to say no to anyone locally asking, "Can I?" because to me it's just the same as when, I went back to Katrina, when I was sitting at my kitchen table with Stan Garnett, who was a fabulous person at USDA.

He was one of the best people imaginable, just outstanding human being. He's one of the people that made me want to be in these programs.

Anyway, sending emails to Stan Garnett asking for waivers before Katrina passed over at my house and cut off my electricity, recognizing the gravity of how bad this was going to be, we need all these latitudes to be able to operate.

And before I could get electricity back we've gotten the response, "Yes," from USDA, and that was fabulous. And then you go through all the years, that was impressive, because most of Louisiana we had to run free.

Every disaster-declared parish got to claim their kids is free, which is so amazing and helps everyone operate. So initially we took that same mentality and said, "Yes."

Regardless of what the rules were, and we've got to keep in mind the accountability, our statement was, "Yes," and then how do we do it under the yes?

Melissa Campbell

You asked how do we overcome the challenges. And sometimes when we're answering these questions I feel like I'm answering on behalf of the school

systems and what they do, and sometimes answering at the State Agency what we did. But to overcome challenges I kind of thought there was two major pieces. One is the USDA waivers to change those regulations that were in place that prevented all these different operations. Those waivers open things up to allow the school systems to feed in the way that they can do the process that they needed to do to feed these kids. And the other way that challenges were overcome I think was people thinking creatively and really taking ownership of the fact that it was their job to feed these children.

And they had to work long hours. In our office we were answering phones, cell phones, at night and anytime because, that was our role. So we didn't have the difficult role of the physically working hours and hours trying to figure out a process. The challenges were overcome by hard physical and mental work on behalf of the school systems. Creative thinking, problem solving, trial and error. Okay, we're trying this. Okay, this didn't quite work. Let's change it. Things like when they were trying to figure out how best to make this food. A lot of school systems did boxes of meals that were for a whole week.

How do we get these to these families? And some tried various ways. Some did meal pickup sites. Well some of them started to learn, well, meal pickup times at 10am, which is traditional school food service time, 10am to 12pm, maybe don't work for families who are still having to work. So having to problem solve and think well, a 10am pickup time isn't always going to be great for our families. Let's move it to a four or five o'clock PM pickup time, which is completely different from traditional school food service hours. So they kept trying trial and error until they finally found a system that worked for their unique community.

John Dupre

A major thing that also came in that was very innovative was the Baylor University Meals-to-You program. It was also one of the major innovative things to overcome obstacles, to address the obstacles, because it also brought to light a different way of operating, a different way of looking at what those unitized meals could be, and look like.

So not only what they did in terms of offering the meals and getting them to the homes in a different way than we'd ever seen before, it really re-envisioned what a meal could be, a reimbursable meal.

It became a pattern later on, for a lot of other, smaller local operators to kind of follow in terms of trying to recreate them.

Melissa Campbell

Yes, I think one of your questions was tell you about what we consider to be our successes.

The Louisiana Department of Education heard about the Baylor Meals-to-You program and took really quick action to utilize that as much as we could, to draw in as many school systems to be able to use that program, because it took the burden off of a lot of the school systems. And so what ended up happening with that is that, out of all the states in the United States that used the Baylor Meals-to-You program at that time, Louisiana by far and away had the highest participation, had the highest number of meals serve through that program.

Far and away the next closest state I believe, don't quote me on this, but I believe was Texas, and it wasn't nearly the volume, so Louisiana success, I think, was being an early, rapid adapter of that program.

John Dupre

And USDA was very instrumental in making all that happen.

And again I may misquote the name and title, but it was Deputy Under Secretary Brandon Lipps, who was in place at the time, and he came to Louisiana a lot and he was very instrumental in helping us make that happen; so a lot of wonderful people.

Melissa Campbell

Bill Ludwig did a lot to help that program to work with Louisiana, work with Baylor, cut through some barriers and red tape so we could do that.

John Dupre

We kept lobbying Bill to try to get more and more, because you have a certain capacity, so you can only get so much, and we were trying to get Bill to lobby to get Louisiana a little bigger piece of the pie.

Louisiana is a fantastic place, and you can tell by my accent, I mess up two languages, I tell people. I mess up English and French.

When I used to teach at university, at LSU, I used to tell people after so much time, I want to start drifting off into French, Cajun French, in my speech because as I get tired it gets easier.

But USDA, since Katrina, I mean it was always a wonderful organization, but since Katrina there was a whole different light and focus placed on disaster management and assistance.

And in fact I was fortunate, I went to DC and talked a little bit on disaster preparedness. And one of the statements I had in that presentation was to know your plan well enough to not have to use your plan.

It's preparation, so that you are mentally in the best place you can be to be aware of your resources and your contacts.

I think it's the fighter Mike Tyson who said, when people had a plan to defeat him when he was undefeatable for a while and he said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

And he's right, because then it's real.

But the preparation allows you to adjust, adapt, and overcome any situation that you're in and that's what the true preparation planning is. It's not a script that you can follow; it's putting yourself in the best mental place to address the needs as they are identified. So that's been our role and we've been very fortunate that we've been very capable and there are a lot of wonderful capable people in Louisiana who are willing to step out of their comfort zone and, in the worst of times, help others who are in worse shape than them. Sometimes you have people who have no homes but are still trying to help other people because they've realized other people are in greater need.

Melissa Campbell

Louisiana has been - in addition to Katrina - in 2016 we had the big flood which impacted all of us.

And then we've had the recent hurricanes.

John Dupre

Unfortunately, we have had quite a few disasters but we're not unlike so many places along the Gulf in that respect.

We do have a high poverty rate in our state, and unfortunately pretty much even without the disasters, anywhere you put your finger on the map in Louisiana we can probably qualify that area as high poverty, based on one of the many criteria you can use, beyond just the free and reduced, by the census data, housing data, etc., so for such a wonderful place and so many wonderful people, we do have a tragic side to it that we have such wonderful numbers and participation, because we are so poor statewide.

And so we had a wonderful crew of people here who really went in when the waivers started coming from USDA. We even wrote a lot of requests for waivers, most of which got approved. We even wrote one that was for statewide CEP.

And it got denied at that time and now it's a possibility, but we had written one requesting that the state be recognized as a single unit. We were trying to think way out of the box, how can we get back to school normally; all these kids who are still in terrible states in terms of the families in the situations in need and need assistance.

How can we get more people better assistance with less cost? So we really had a creative crew in here of people who all jumped in and said, "You know, USDA said nothing's off the table so throw anything at me." I apologize ahead of time. I said, "I'm going to put you on the spot, to say no to a lot of crazy stuff. But y'all opened that door, and so you know yeah whatever comes off the top of my head we're going to shoot to you. We don't mind being rejected, but we want to put it all out there."

They had a lot of wonderful threads because it was all based in the programs that currently exist, trying to identify how they could expand, to go into more areas and serve more people.

Melissa Campbell

So some of our success, I think, was our ability to use what we learned for disaster planning and continue to adapt it to the circumstance; the work ethic, and the creative thinking and the drive of employees. Another success, because I've gotten back to that again, was I think that the department did a great job of

matching school systems with community partners, that has carried on to this day, and I think will continue to be a benefit in terms of summer feeding and after school feeding.

Because some school systems were not capable of serving meals, especially in the beginning of the pandemic. They didn't have the staff, they didn't have the means, for whatever reason, and so one of the things that happened is that I remember I'm in our office, and I remember John calling a church because our goal was to have at least one feeding operation in every community, at least one feeding operation in every community.

John Dupre

Which is a parish, and some of our parishes are kind of small in terms of population. But even the most rural we wanted to have one pickup point where people could access program meals.

So in a way it was more challenging, because when you get into very small, rural poverty in the state, as you know, the Delta region is probably the poorest region in our country. At least that's a lot of what we had, and we have the Delta Initiative which we were part of many years ago with USDA.

And that was our primary target. USDA allowed us to focus the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program when it came on to just the Delta parishes to try to focus the resources there because of the high rural poverty and the difficulty of getting services to people.

And, just as, if not more difficult, getting people to services. So we really focus on those rural, poor, high poverty areas which is pretty much every rural area in Louisiana.

And so yeah just trying to get a pickup site where maybe you can get a cluster of people to go together, maybe a church can get a bus and pick up a bunch of different people and bring them to that site.

Any kind of resource that we could dream up or find, we tried to access that to make sure there was something somewhere.

Melissa Campbell

And now those partnerships are developed. These relationships are developed, and so again, that carries forward into summer and it carries forward into after school feeding, now that these school systems, if they don't have the capability, or if they need assistance or whatever, they know some community partners in their area that they you know they can work together to provide meals for kids. We did a lot of calling different organizations that we knew had started feeding in one location and saying, "Hey can you take this one on? Can you take this one on?"

But I think our other biggest success was learning to use and using virtual platforms to be able to convey information. That was our big one, too, because before we were very much in person. We operated in person for training, for meetings, for conveying information, we were very much an in person group and maybe a little bit slow to adapt technology, but this really forced us to adapt technology and now school districts that are in rural parts, that are not located in Baton Rouge, they have just as much access to our meetings and to our trainings as anyone who lives here in this area.

John Dupre

Even without Covid no one can see us going back to that, doing all the trainings in person, under any circumstance again.

Melissa Campbell

I think now we're getting into the how we adapted.

Jeffrey Boyce

Yes, you're answering all my questions without me having to ask them.

John Dupre

We can't see someone driving five hours for an hour meeting. You drive four hours to get there, and you stay a night sometimes, because you're really far away.

And then to go back when you can just walk in your office and turn on your computer, participate, have as many people as you want also participate. So it's

not like we can send one person or two people because of the cost, because you know resource availability, etc.

Everyone can participate, plus you record it, and if you didn't get it now, you can get it later. You can go back and look at it.

I'd love to be able to do certain things, especially like some of the conference stuff, because you do lose some of the sharing. Not so much the presentation materials, but the camaraderie amongst participants, you lose some of that and that's invaluable for so many people sometimes to learn what other people are doing. Sometimes, like when I was a new state director I'd go to national meetings, and I went with seeing all the problems we had, and surely everyone else's figuring these things out, and how to come up with how do I get Louisiana be where everybody else is.

And I realized, and Mr. Paul Schmitz, fantastic human being, worked his career in USDA, he passed away, many years ago. He was in Southwest Region. He said, "John, the only difference between you and everybody else is you go out and tell everybody all your problems. Other people are talking about the successes they have. You're talking about all the things that you feel are not successful."

So he said, "They're all struggling with the same problems. It's just you're out there openly spilling everything out saying how do we address all these things because we're failing, in my opinion?" And I walked away realizing we weren't doing such a bad job, number one, because everybody was struggling with the same issues, but the second thing is just learning how other people looked at situations and then me being able to sit back and have another perspective.

And then come back and not necessarily take their ideas, but learn how to rethink my own ideas and step back a little bit further and see it differently.

And then we can come up with something that really addresses what we are needing. A plan is fantastic, and you can look at it on paper that it works, but to carry out can't always just be done as easy as you can write it.

So the reality of being able to realistically know, beyond what's available, but what is practical and possible.

Melissa Campbell

So, in light of that, we do plan to, when it's safe, continue some opportunities for large, in person gatherings, but we, like John said, will never go back to only that. I mean the majority of what we do will be online, so that everyone can do it. Another thing that we adapted that we probably should have done for a long time, but we didn't quite realize, maybe, and we will certainly continue to do, is having now monthly meetings for all of our districts to participate in to convey information. In the past, we had these large meetings, maybe a couple times a year, or as maybe a big piece of information came up, but in the early stages of the pandemic, we started weekly hosting these zoom meetings, because things were changing so rapidly, information was changing so rapidly and we wanted to make sure our districts knew what they were allowed to do and what changes have happened, and then, as the pandemic changed, that transitioned to biweekly, and now we do monthly update webinars, monthly update meetings where we keep a running list of all the information that our school systems or other feeding organizations might need. And I don't see us ever changing that. It's invaluable, I think.

John Dupre

Another thing initially was we split the problem into two basic sections. I sat down with the managers and I said, "Since the staff are at home, and we do have to have logs of work, telework logs, one thing is to start going over sections of regulations, just going through it as a staff, and giving thoughts on different sections of regs, feedback to the managers about those sections."

Melissa Campbell

They did a lot of studying.

John Dupre

They did a lot of studying. Even though they'd been around a long time, to reassess something that they might not have looked at in a long time.

The other thing probably that was most valuable is, aside from the group calls, we separated all sponsors into clusters by program, and the people working closest with the program, and every sponsor was called every week in a telephone call.

So every single sponsor got a telephone call every single week. Not only did we recap what was said in the group meetings, but we also, because we knew the issues of that individual sponsor, we talked to them about their unique issues. And as we went back into conducting reviews we were also able to talk to them about weaknesses they had in the past and, and try to work with them on those things to give an opportunity for one on one conversation for people who might not open up in a group meeting or share certain things that they may think doesn't look great in their organization.

To talk directly with one of the staff and say, "This is what we're doing, but we don't know how." And then to try to work through those issues, one on one, for those individual positions. We're still doing that, not quite as diligently as we had started, but for over a year, we did every week. Every organization got a direct phone call.

Melissa Campbell

That was good, because we had a lot of new directors. During Covid there was a lot of transition, and a lot of people I think kind of threw in the towel and were like 'I can't do this anymore,' and so we have a lot of new people, and I think that those calls allowed that relationship building.

Nutrition people in the district felt like they had a personal contact at the State Agency that they could call and talk about - to cry with - I mean I can't tell you how many times that we have picked up panic phone calls, crying phone calls, just people who felt like they were at just the end of their rope. This is more early on, and to just kind of, if nothing else, listen to them and to help work with them, and so that little piece of relationship building. It's small, but I think it was really important at that time.

John Dupre

Yeah, sometimes the best thing you can do is listen to someone else's problems, be there to hear, and sometimes we can't really offer a true solution, but we can at least be understanding, and try to make them understand that they're not failing.

Melissa Campbell

And they're not alone. They're not failing.

John Dupre

They are important and they are doing the best job they can, and just keep encouraging them to continue the great work that they do.

So, that's sometimes the biggest thing we can do.

Jeffrey Boyce

Have there been any positive outcomes of your experiences with Covid 19 that will continue?

Melissa Campbell

One of the positive outcomes is of course the technology, and we've talked about that already, but for the schools, I think, being open to now mobile meal service, breakfast in the classroom. I think they've learned how to do those kinds of things now.

We all know kids don't, especially when they get in high school and stuff, they don't want to go into the cafeteria and sit down in the cafeteria and eat.

And that was the only way that a lot of school systems knew to do it. Now that they've had to serve meals in classrooms and meals outside, I think that will open them up in the future to continue these different types of operations.

And on the State Agency side, people learned how to work from home. That has certainly had its challenges, there's the challenges for sure, but also learning that it can be done.

Jeffrey Boyce

I'm doing it right now.

Melissa Campbell

You're doing it right now, and so it can be done, and that gives the opportunity for people who may not be based in the actual location of the building, but yet have wonderful expertise to be able to maybe participate in work. And then the other thing that I thought was a positive outcome of this is now that we have a precedent for dealing with this type of disaster, which it was a disaster, and one

of the things that USDA I know has been asking lately is what should be the waivers, what types of things do the school systems need to be able to accommodate future disasters?

And so I think this has been such a big learning experience and now we're not in this uncharted territory anymore. Next time there's a disaster like this, God forbid, hopefully, we at least have some tools. We know how to do it.

John Dupre

USDA is always trying to help plan for how we can assist the states, and I think the more they can have from a federal standpoint, plans or processes that can automatically be approved, that's fantastic. But from my point of view in the state, it's more of the ability to request as needed, assistance or flexibility to address the needs of the people and serve them through these programs.

So it's really more of a way to just tell USDA I need these things. USDA has to have their written protocols in place to say when you need these things we have these set processes that we can pull together, but for us it's really just to be able to communicate in a quick, organized fashion, these are the broad types of things that we see will be needed to serve the people who are in real need for any particular reason. One of my things, working on three decades of service as state director in child nutrition programs in Louisiana, I keep saying from the beginning, I never could understand how food is any less important than the school bus or the textbooks or the buildings the kids sit in or any other things that are required to make a school day happen.

Everywhere kids are required by law to participate in school in some form in pretty much I assume most every state. In Louisiana you have to be in school or somewhere that you're accounted for.

I don't understand how that's less of a point. I tell adults, "Try to go to work and don't eat and see how hard it is to focus."

Pull that into the world of an eight year old, seven year old, 14 year old child, and see how you think they struggle with attention. With anything, all the peripheral services needed, from counseling to the school bus ride, the meals.

The more we can take out what I call the support areas or the distractions that can occur if you don't have those things met in your life, the better able that child can take advantage of what that teacher has to offer and better chance they have of having a great outcome and a positive life experience going beyond that.

So I don't understand how we can't look at this as a nation and stop the MASSIVE burden of free and reduced price meal identification.

I will bet you if people a lot smarter than me looked at it, they would find that everyone from USDA to the state to the local sponsors to all the record retention to the endless audits that happen for every level, from independent auditors, federal or state auditors, and on and on, the point of service counts to every child identified, that burden and cost of massive bureaucracy, that's just simple meal eligibility identification, but it's so simple, one form.

But it's so massive and burdensome and costly, there's no way, in my opinion, to feed the rest of the kids who aren't free in this nation wouldn't be very close, if not cheaper, if that was eliminated.

Melissa Campbell

So that's a positive outcome that we're hoping to see.

John Dupre

And that's something that across my time service, before I retired, it would be so incredible to see that opportunity exist, that we recognize this is one of the critical components in a child's day for them to be able to just exist, much less to take advantage of growth and learning in a positive manner.

So if in any way we can get the people in charge of Congress to realize that this is one of the greatest things they could do in their tenure in Congress, would be to recognize that and do something to dismantle a system that was wonderful - I'm not saying it wasn't - it worked in its time, but just like we're all trying to transition to the new world we're in, this is a transition point and a perfect time to take that next step and realize we did it for a purpose. That purpose is no longer the same.

And what these child nutrition programs do for the US, forming agricultural infrastructure. That they are a major part of that. The commodity, you can imagine, this is probably the biggest food service operation in the nation, that

draws down all these commodities every day, and how that supports the US agricultural economy.

So it's not just kids you're touching every day and saying let's provide a meal and let's help those families directly. You're protecting one of the most important things that we have in our nation and that's our agricultural industry, to continue on as a free and independent nation.

So if you look at it from all sides truly that's one of the greatest things we all could experience in this lifetime.

And it takes away the need for so many waivers going forward and so many challenges when something happens. Kids are free, so we don't worry about that part.

Jeffrey Boyce

Thank you guys so much for taking the time to talk with me today.

Melissa Campbell

We loved it.

John Dupre

Anytime. We would love to share our thoughts. Thank you for the therapeutic moments you have allowed us to enjoy here by unleashing some of the experiences we've been through because we do enjoy sharing it.

Melissa Campbell

We do. This job is a part of who we are.

John Dupre

We at the state don't feed kids. No matter what people say, we don't. We are almost like a finance agency to the Federal Government. We get money. We make sure that money goes to the right place.

But, dealing with everyone who's trying to feed kids, we have a very critical role in supporting those people to help them understand how to get that done, how to do their jobs, how to stay in business.

And it's very critical and so I do appreciate so much people I've been able to work with and share information, because we do touch all those lives and all those people in our own way and we are appreciative of that. And we do appreciate what you're trying to do here to help gather those stories and share the reality.

Jeffrey Boyce

Thank you.

John Dupre & Melissa Campbell

Thank you, bye-bye.