

Masters of Scale: Rapid Response Transcript – Claire Babineaux-Fontenot

“Iterating under pressure, with Feeding America's Claire Babineaux-Fontenot”

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CLAIRE BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Our estimates are that food insecurity rates could soar to as much as 50 million people being food insecure.

There are some communities in this country where one out of every two kids is food insecure or one out of every four individuals is food insecure. Unfortunately, that's likely to be true for a while.

We refer to it as the perfect storm: As we're seeing more people in need of our services, we were seeing our traditional supply deplete. Remember those empty store shelves? That means there was nothing that they were donating to us. It was a big gap, right when we had a significant need. We normally have about 2 million volunteers across the country. An inordinate number of our volunteers are over the age of 65. So many of those volunteers needed to protect their health, and they weren't able to come out and volunteer with us anymore. So, again, perfect storm.

The biggest thing at stake is opportunity lost. That we'll choose to ignore what we know now. As long as we remember, I think we will do better, and I'm confident we're going to remember, and then you're going to invite me back, and I'm going to say, "Hey, do you remember?"

BOB SAFIAN: That's Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, CEO of Feeding America, a network of more than 200 food banks across the U.S.

Since the pandemic hit, Feeding America has faced an extraordinary burden: ballooning need from the country's most vulnerable populations, alongside pressured resources and a suddenly untenable distribution system.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of *Fast Company*, founder of The Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk with Claire because, in order to provide meals for the hungry, she's had to find entrepreneurial solutions to a dizzying array of obstacles.

She successfully landed a \$100 million donation from Jeff Bezos and was able to pull together bipartisan support from the government.

She tapped into her background as a top executive at Walmart to leverage her member organizations and rethink last-mile delivery.

Claire sees the acute inequity in American society, and is deeply troubled by the disproportionate impact felt by communities of color – both before the pandemic and as a result of it.

But she's also hopeful that a new playbook can bring us to a better future. All we have to do, she says, is remember the right lessons, and get to work on what matters most.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, CEO of Feeding America, a nationwide nonprofit network of food banks that provides food to millions of people. Claire is coming to us from Texas, as I ask my questions from New York. Claire, thanks for joining us.

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Thanks so much for having me on. Appreciate it.

SAFIAN: So we've all experienced so much over the past 12 months, burgeoning new challenges, health-wise, economically, socially, racially. I wanted to start by asking you to take us back to last spring. As the leader of a large organization you had a certain set of plans, priorities heading into 2020, and then the pandemic hits. How did that impact your operations, your priorities, the demands placed on the organization?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Yeah, well, I say that it was in the spring that the whole world changed, certainly, for our members, but more importantly for people facing hunger. So going into March of last year, the [USDA publishes food insecurity rates](#) for the country, and their projections were that about 35 million people were food insecure. That's 35 million too many. But that represented significant progress, because in the last economic downturn, or last great recession of 2008, we saw those numbers go to nearly 50 million – and it took 10 years to get back to pre-recession rates. So, here we are in March, we're finally at pre-recession rates, we're making progress, and then COVID.

So, some of the first revelations were one, that our normal method of distributing food was not going to be appropriate for the moment, because as you might imagine, what we tended to do was to have people come inside of buildings, congregate, and get access to choices of food.

So our distribution method was forced to change. Before the pandemic, there were about 22 million kids who qualified for free or reduced lunch. We knew that those children, if schools are closed, that those kids were not going to get access to food. So many of our members started coming up with innovations there, too. Tracking with bus routes and going into these communities and providing food there, we started using

technology. So the whole thing really, it completely changed the way that we had to look at how we were going to get food to people in need.

SAFIAN: And a lot of the delivery, historically, there was a lot of volunteer effort. Did your volume of volunteers drop, your volume of funding? It seems like the need's rising at the same time that your capacity to supply becomes more complicated.

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: You are exactly right, Bob. We refer to it as the perfect storm: As we're seeing more people in need of our services, we were seeing our traditional supply deplete. I mean, very quickly, there were all kinds of disruptions in the supply chain. So if your audience can remember those empty store shelves, that was a significant source.

If those shelves were empty, that means there was nothing that they were donating to us. And if they're not donating to us, it was a big gap, right when we had a significant need. In terms of volunteers, we normally have about 2 million volunteers across the country. An inordinate number of our volunteers are over the age of 65. So many of those volunteers needed to protect their health, and they weren't able to come out and volunteer with us anymore. So, again, perfect storm, Bob.

SAFIAN: So when you're in that situation, how do you lead in a crisis like that?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Well, the first thing that I did was I recognized that we had an infrastructure that was like no other infrastructure in the charitable food system. So 200 member food banks, over 60,000 agency partners. We had an infrastructure that if we were able to be agile, we were going to be able to rise to this moment. And it started happening very, very quickly. Leaning in on our leaders – we have a remarkable group of people who do this work at the national level and throughout local communities, and what they needed was to be empowered to get it done – and they've delivered.

SAFIAN: And to what extent are you giving ideas to your local partners? To what extent are you getting ideas from those partners and sharing them with each other? How does that information flow work?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: We certainly have a great team at the national level, but the best ideas always come from our members and our agency partners. And that was certainly true during this pandemic as well. So one of the benefits of being a national network is, as there was experimentation happening in one area of the country, and they were learning – testing and learning things – we are able to share best practices across the whole suite of our network. And they were able to not have to go back and relearn what someone else did, but instead get that even better. And then we could cascade that throughout as well. That's certainly helped us a lot with those mobile, those mass distributions that you saw.

It got to be a science. Another thing though that we were able to do at the national level, Bob, was we were able to get a sense of the pulse of what was happening on the ground. So we could help the government as well as our donors know where the acute needs were across the country, and when it was hitting. Because we were conducting pulse surveys with our members. We were able to size up what the challenge was very quickly. We're able to direct resources to where the resources were needed the most.

SAFIAN: Are there any particularly memorable examples or interactions that you had with food banks or volunteers or distribution centers, in-person visits you made?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Oh, there are lots of them. So I immediately think about being at a food distribution for a Veteran's Day. Someone was in a white SUV, and I saw something coming out of the person's window, and from a distance, I couldn't tell what that was. And as I looked more closely, I could see that it was an American flag. And the senior who was in need of help was waving the flag and had a sign saying, thank you, because she saw that the National Guard was there to help us. And we talked about how so many of our volunteers were not able to help us early on, especially in the crisis, well, there are other volunteers who stepped up, and the National Guard did so in a really big way. So to be there in that moment and to recognize the sincere appreciation that that senior had for the National Guard was a really big deal, I don't think I'll ever forget that.

I've had other moments with kids who are there with their parents. And there's a particular one with a kid who's at a distribution, and they're getting fresh fruit and vegetables. And the person who works inside of our organization wants to provide the kid with a fruit and assuming that a banana would be a good one, giving him something to put in his hands, and the kid pointed and wanted a watermelon. And they're like, "You want a watermelon?" He said "Yep." So that kid got a watermelon, and you'd swear that it was Christmas Day. And recognizing how valuable those moments are to people, how affirming it can be and witnessing the deep gratitude. I just got back from food distributions in the Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey area, and every time I get a chance to be around people who are being served by our work, I feel that appreciation.

I felt that I'm uniquely positioned to be helpful to people facing hunger, uniquely positioned as an individual and as a leader in this work, to build bridges across divides that might seem insurmountable, but I don't feel burdened by any of it. I feel privileged that I get the chance to do all of it.

SAFIANL: A lot of people have felt this year has been very stressful. Did you feel the stress?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: I know we're coming through just with audio, but I am a mere mortal. When you cut me, I definitely bleed, Bob. So yes, the stress gets to me. Of course it gets to me.

One of the mistakes that I made actually is that early in the pandemic, my impulse was that as long as there are people who were struggling out there, I need to be working. So I blurred those lines of work and life. There was no balance.

I looked back, and I realized that there were people on my team who were doing the same thing. They weren't taking off, they were working on Saturdays and Sundays, and they had worked for, I mean, two months without taking one day off. And I realized that I was providing a very, very powerful and negative example for the members of my team. That if not for myself, and that should have been good enough, I should do it for them. I should provide an example that mere mortals need a break, that I needed to take time off, so I finally took some time off.

And the day that I did it, Bob, was on a day when I woke up in the morning, and at 7:00 AM I had a call with some members of my team, and I noticed I was awfully snarky. And I'm thinking, "What did they say to make me so snarky? They don't deserve that." The way that my stress was showing up was: I was becoming increasingly less patient, increasingly less tolerant, and I thought, "Oh, I'm not being helpful." So that's the day that I said, "Okay, *no más*. I am going to take some time off." And I did. And now I actually, for my own emotional health and wellbeing, and for my viability as a leader in this space, I now have on my calendar that I will take R&R. By design, it's on my calendar. So every quarter I'm taking one long weekend.

SAFIAN: How do you get your organization to know that and to follow that example?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: So I think what I've tried to do is do it out loud. I try to answer questions like this one honestly.

SAFIAN: I know with all the demand in the spring, the government came up with some money, you found funding in other areas, I know through things like the all-in challenges that activated celebrities and corporate partners, but you also got a huge gift from Jeff Bezos, as I remember, \$100 million. How did that come about? And what did that enable?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Wow. I recall distinctly receiving an email, and it got to be late at night so it's all so dramatic, right Bob? I got an email saying that this person knew of someone who was contemplating possibly providing a sizable gift to Feeding America, but there were some key questions like: One, can our network take on a gift of this scale? Two, can we get it in the hands of local communities in a very small window of time?

I called the executive team and said, "Look, guys, I think this is serious. I think it's real. But we can't do this if we don't do it together. What do you think? Could we get it done?" The consensus was that we could, so I went back and said yes. And within hours, we had \$100 million. Within days, all 100 million of those dollars had been dispersed into local communities as the donor intended.

SAFIAN: Had you worked with Bezos before?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: I guess the answer to that would be no. Before coming in to Feeding America, I was the Executive Vice President of Finance and Treasurer at Walmart, another rather storied retailer, so I certainly knew of Mr. Bezos.

I laughingly say that before the gift, I used to refer to him as Jeff. After the gift, it's always Mr. Bezos.

[AD BREAK]

SAFIAN: So you got through the immediate response phase, the supply chain normalizes, there's some extra funding that's acquired, the demand for food remains high, though, right?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Our estimates are that food insecurity rates could soar to as much as 50 million people being food insecure. The unfortunate thing is that even as the rest of the economy bounces back, these communities, the ones that are turning to us for help, are, by their nature, less resilient.

We continue to see increased demand at a rate of a little under 60%, which is huge. We continue to see about 40% of the people who are turning to us for help have never before relied upon the charitable food system.

That's one in six individuals, that's one in four children, and that's an average. There are some communities in this country where one out of every two kids is food insecure, or one out of every four individuals is food insecure. Unfortunately, that's likely to be true for a while.

I remember seeing an estimate when I first joined Feeding America in 2018 that said that about 72 billion pounds of perfectly edible food go to landfills, not counting household waste. How do you reconcile that with 35 million people being food insecure? Or 50, or 10, or five, for that matter?

SAFIAN: The pandemic disproportionately impacted communities of color. We've seen it in health outcomes, in jobs, in economic opportunity. We've seen it in vaccine availability.

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Yes.

SAFIAN: What's it going to take to change that?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: System change. System change. When you were talking about March earlier, I have to tell you a horrible moment for me was when I started hearing about the comorbidities that made COVID more lethal. When I learned about

where the closures were happening in the economy, I knew vulnerable communities, communities of color, were going to be inordinately impacted by the financial implications of this.

So these are things that have been hidden in plain sight for a very long time. What gives me hope though, Bob, is I think that before this pandemic, we had the luxury of not looking at certain things. We had the luxury of not noticing certain things. I think that the pandemic, though it is certainly a big ugly gray cloud, there are some silver linings. And I think among them is that now we see. Just as we've seen this bipartisan support for our efforts when it was exposed that there was so much need out there, I don't for a moment think it's going to be easy, but I do think that there are some things that have changed. I think that we have an awareness, and we have a desire, and I know that we have resources. So if I can help us to match up all three of those, we've got solutions.

SAFIAN: You've talked a bit about wanting to not go back to old ways, but rewrite the playbook. What does the new playbook look like? What are those pieces?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: So one of them definitely is in the policy space. There are federal nutrition programs that exist right now like SNAP. We know that based upon data, that for every one meal that our remarkable food banking network can provide, that SNAP can provide nine. We know that for every dollar invested in SNAP, the return of the economy is about \$1.70 or so. That's a really good return. So we know that it's not only good but we also know that it's highly stimulative to local and macro economies.

We need to make it easier for people to get access to these federal nutrition programs. We also have some perverse incentives built into the system right now. Your listeners might have noticed that there was a moment in time when there were visuals of these long lines, and yet there were farmers who were throwing away milk or cracking eggs, and they might've been thinking, "Oh, how wasteful of the farmers." The story is more nuanced than that. Some of those farmers couldn't afford to give it away because there are perverse incentives inside of the system that would have made it more onerous for them to give it to people in need than to throw it away or destroy it. So there are some fundamental things that we need to work on from a policy perspective.

We need to continue to remember that after this pandemic, the health implications of this pandemic have gone away, that those lines, they might not be blocking traffic in Pittsburgh, or they might not be 10,000 cars in San Antonio all at one time, but those people are going to still need help. So I encourage people to continue to be aware of the challenges, to continue to provide financial support and to also come out and volunteer if they can, and to be advocates for vulnerable communities. If we do those things together, then I think we can rebuild.

SAFIAN: You mentioned earlier that your volunteers are often, a lot of them over 65. Are there things you're trying to do to access and get younger people to get more engaged in this?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: So Bob, tell me, what's your audience like? I hope you've got some younger people listening in. Part of it is saying it out loud. It's utilizing opportunities like this one, but a whole plethora of opportunities to talk about the reality of that. There are lots of people who've been working in the hunger fight for decades and decades. I mean, great organizations. We can bring those organizations together and capture the best ideas. And we can actually have a force, if you will, a core of younger people who consider it their civic obligation to show up and help their neighbors in need by supporting organizations like the network that I serve in.

SAFIAN: Yeah. I mean, during this crisis, there's this sort of general public attention to those in need, but I'm sure there's some concern that when we go back to normal, whatever that is, that the attention wanes.

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: There is. I am really concerned about that. I'm concerned about our attention span. I heard so many people excited about 2021. I just can't wait for 2020 to be over. But the danger in that is if it's over, is it over and done with? Do we never look back? Do we not learn from what happened? Do we ignore the things that used to be hidden in plain sight and that are no longer hidden? So I want us to remember 2020 because I want us to learn from it.

SAFIAN: You also mentioned that you worked at Walmart before joining Feeding America. Are there lessons from that experience, from working in a corporate environment that is helpful in scaling the impact that you're after?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Absolutely. And in fact, let me back up one step and say that I used to apologize. The first few months that I was at Feeding America, I went around apologizing all the time for not getting to this work sooner. And I felt a sense of guilt over the fact that I've known my whole life about food insecurity. And in moments like this during these crises, it is so clear to me that I get to leverage all that other stuff I was doing before I got here. So, supply chain – there's a logistics element to the work that we do, and Walmart is a brilliant logistical operation.

There are big, hairy issues that Walmart had to confront, and I had the great privilege of being in the room contemplating those issues. When Walmart was confronted with ... Did you mention a guy named Bezos maybe? And he started out, I think, selling books or something like that. I think Walmart would admit that maybe they were a little slow to realize the potential of what Jeff Bezos was doing and having to play catch up on what it means, that there were certain things that were changed forever, that online retail was forever. So now I'm in this role, and I get to say, what are the parts of who we are as a network that we need to retain?

How do we keep the things that we do so well and actually continue to innovate and grow and learn? I was on the foundation board at Walmart too, which comes in handy

because part of what they did, they funded organizations. So I think I have a good sense of why people make investments in organizations like ours. And I hope that that helps me to help them to know that we are a worthwhile investment.

SAFIAN: And the way you're delivering services, been forced to during the pandemic, do you think you'll continue to deliver them that way on the other side, or are you going to go back to the mass groupings? I know there are apps that you guys are piloting.

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: I think we're going to do a little combination of things, absolutely. This has accelerated things we were going to be working on anyway, some things we were already working on. We're going to be providing a panoply, if you will, of offerings based upon the unique needs of the people that we serve. So something like order ahead, where you get to go on an app and you get to see what's available and not participate in waste because you get to choose the things that you know you're actually going to use, as an example. Some of these deliveries that we've done, this idea of going to where the needs are, that's staying with us, the best practices that we have around mobile distributions. The leveraging of technologies, the last-mile innovations – those are going to stay with us.

But one of the disadvantages of these mass distributions is there's no choice in it. Not for the person who's receiving the food. And I fundamentally believe that there's dignity in choice, Bob. There's dignity in choice so even if I'm well-intended as our network is well-intended, if we're the ones packing the box, and we're deciding what's in the box, and then because you happen to have fallen on bad times, now you've got to eat what we've given you.

That has to be a part of what changes going forward. Now it's awfully efficient, but it's not as effective as other methods.

SAFIAN: What's at stake in this moment?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: I really think that the biggest thing at stake is opportunity lost. I think we have a chance right now with eyes wide open to do better and to be better. What's at stake is what you alluded to earlier. That maybe we'll choose to close them again. Maybe we'll choose to ignore the stuff that we learned. I think that's the biggest risk. I really think that's the biggest risk is that we'll choose to ignore what we know now. As long as we remember, I think we will do better, and I'm confident we're going to remember, and then you're going to invite me back, and I'm going to say, "Hey, do you remember?"

SAFIAN: So Claire, if someone does want to get involved to help out, what's the best starting point for that?

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: The best place to start is www.feedingamerica.org. There, you can find ways to be educated on issues. You can find ways to give time, to give money if you have it available to you. We also have on that website, if you put in the zip code of the community that you care the most about, we actually have a food bank locator there, and it'll direct you to the food bank serving that community. So if you want to have a local impact, it gives you the ability to do that too. And when you reach out to them, they'll tell you what they need exactly to serve that specific community. So I do ask that you go to www.feedingamerica.org, and let's start there.

SAFIAN: And I want to thank you for taking the time and being with us and talking to our audience about this. I really appreciate it.

BABINEAUX-FONTENOT: Well, again, I sincerely appreciate that you would have me on. And I'll bet there are listeners who are supporters of our work. And whether they provided a nickel or a hundred million dollars – or if they didn't even have that nickel, if they provided time or energy – I sincerely appreciate every single investment in our work. And we will work hard to ensure that we're great stewards of those investments. So thank you so much.