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## Diana Aviv Is Bracing for a Fight

By Eden Stiffman

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EVE EDELHEIT FOR THE CHRONICLE

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A year and a half into her tenure at Feeding America, Ms. Aviv is gearing up for what could be the greatest threat to the social safety net in decades. Policy experts expect President Trump and the Republican-led Congress to cut domestic hunger programs like food stamps and those that provide food and money to states to help the needy. Such reductions would probably put more stress on nonprofits as more people struggle to get enough to eat.

Feeding America is already helping people get meals every day. Last year, it raised more than \$2.36 billion, allowing its network of 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries and meal programs to serve 46 million people. But now, says Ms. Aviv, "we are going to be fighting on many fronts here. And we're going to have to pick our battles."

### Upcoming Fight

Feeding America will have to navigate difficult terrain. The charity believes it will have to fight to protect federal nutrition programs, ensure the 2018 Farm Bill provides resources to combat hunger, and protect charitable tax deductions that encourage donors to support food banks and pantries — all without getting too partisan. To be successful, Feeding America will need friends on both sides of the aisle.

"We can't do what Planned Parenthood did," Ms. Aviv says, referring to its campaign asking supporters to give in the new vice president's name. "We want Mike Pence to support us. We have to do this carefully and quietly."

### Engaging the Troops

It's minus two degrees outside, and Diana Aviv, chief executive of Feeding America, the nation's largest anti-hunger nonprofit, huddles in a conference room with her top executives. The meeting starts off with some good news: More donations are pouring in than were forecast, and a major data firm is considering providing pro bono help to accelerate the charity's food-waste reduction efforts.

Then, in her crisp South African accent and with no-nonsense directness, Ms. Aviv relays a phone conversation she had that morning with the chairman of Feeding America's board, hitting home a point that has become the charity's major focus in recent months.

"There is deep concern among our board members and others that I talk to that we're going to lose the farm," she says, referring to worries about the array of federal programs that alleviate hunger.

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Ms. Aviv rose to be one of the most visible leaders in the often-fragmented nonprofit world during her previous job, serving 12 years as president of Independent Sector. She led the coalition of charities, foundations, and corporate grant makers through the economic downturn, helped craft a set of good-governance principles, and became a strong voice on Capitol Hill, relentlessly advocating for the charitable deduction.

As Ms. Aviv prepares to do battle again, she's bulking up Feeding America's presence in Washington and working to get leaders throughout the group's network engaged in advocacy.

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## FEEDING THE NEEDY: A CAUSE THAT COMPANIES LOVE

Feeding America holds the third spot on *The Chronicle's* latest ranking of the 400 charities that raise the most money from private sources, trailing only Fidelity Charitable and United Way Worldwide. A decade earlier, it ranked No. 21. The charity's impressive growth is largely the result of its deep ties to the corporate world. Of the more than \$2.36 billion Feeding America received in fiscal 2016, 96 percent was in the form of donated goods and services from grocery stores, farms, and food processors.

The nature of those relationships was a surprise to Ms. Aviv, who says she had to fight hard for foundation and corporate grants at Independent Sector, the coalition of charities and grant makers she ran for 12 years. She remembers being five minutes late for her first call with a major corporate donor as leader of Feeding America. Before she could apologize, the corporate grant maker said, "Before you say anything, I just want to say how incredibly grateful we are to be able to partner with you. It's such an honor."

"They'd just given us \$1.5 million," says Ms. Aviv, still amused by the exchange. "I can't remember the last time a private foundation said to me, 'I'm so grateful to partner with you.'"

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Most of the nonprofit's 241 national staff members work in the organization's headquarters here in Chicago, just across the river from the landmark Trump International Hotel and Tower.

Ms. Aviv spends much of her time traveling around the country but is based in the D.C. office with the charity's policy team. Even before the election, she had plans to expand the Washington staff from 13 to as many as 40 to 50 over the next five years. It will serve as the home base for people who work on programs as well as those involved in advocacy.

In December, Ms. Aviv asked food-bank leaders in the network to meet with their members of Congress in their home states over the holidays. While that step wasn't new for the organization, there was a renewed sense of interest following the election.

Joe Arthur, executive director of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, responded quickly. His organization serves a part of Pennsylvania that was instrumental in electing President Trump and has strong ties to the agriculture industry.

"I am amazed at the lack of knowledge in our state on just how huge SNAP [food stamps] is to our food and ag industries," he wrote in his email to Ms. Aviv, "not to mention the other federal food and nutrition programs."

## The Right Tone

A few weeks after the election, Feeding America gathered its staff members who work with local food banks to meet with Ms. Aviv. She spoke with urgency about the need to organize and to rise above the panic that many advocates feel about their causes.

Striking the right tone is critical, she told the group.

"There's a deep desire to know how we are going to organize ourselves against the noise of everybody else who's feeling terribly frightened," she said. "The challenge still remains for us, on the one hand, not to become histrionic and add to that, and on the other hand, not to offer a calm that suggests that everything's fine."

Though the political landscape looks different now than it did when Ms. Aviv was hired, Deborah Weinstein thinks Ms. Aviv is just the person to lead the change. Every social-service organization needs to step up its advocacy at a time when big changes in policy could be imminent, says Ms. Weinstein, executive director of the Coalition on Human Needs, an alliance of more than 100 national anti-poverty groups that includes Feeding America.

"We know that we need to do more than we've ever done before," she says. "That means the leadership of someone who understands the issues as well as Diana Aviv does is vital in a time like this."

## Roots in Social Justice

Growing up as a middle-class white girl in apartheid South Africa, Ms. Aviv knew she wanted to devote her life to righting wrongs and "making lives better for people who couldn't make life better for themselves."

Over the course of her career — as a social worker and vice president for public policy at the Jewish Federations of North America — she had moved further and further from working directly with groups that aid the needy.

At Independent Sector, though she wasn't looking for a job, a recruiting firm contacted her on behalf of Feeding America. The opportunity provided her a chance to get back to her roots.

"The 46 million Americans facing hunger had a greater pull on me and my life than helping the whole sector," she says.

Still, her decision to join Feeding America in 2015 surprised many — including her husband, Sterling Speirn, the former head of W.K. Kellogg Foundation. "He thought I was crazy," she says. "He said, 'You're the leader of the whole sector. How can you go be the leader of one organization?'"

Another prominent foundation leader called her up to say she had never heard of the charity.

But in Feeding America, Ms. Aviv says she saw a national organization that was serving an important need and had grown significantly. A name change in 2008 from Second Harvest helped put the organization on the map financially, raised its visibility, and tied it more closely to its mission.

In recent years the top position has had high turnover. Former food-company CEO Bob Aiken, who preceded Ms. Aviv, left after two years. And Vicki Escarra, a former airline marketing executive, stepped down after leading the group for six years. Some staff members were apprehensive about having yet another new leader and worried that their work would get little respect or be wiped away.

But Ms. Aviv said she was excited by the opportunity to head Feeding America because the group still had room to grow. And it had ambition.

## Expanded Mission

Feeding America has always had a dual mission — providing food to those who can't afford to buy it and fighting for policy changes to end hunger. However, the group has mostly focused on seeking food donations and expanding its abilities to provide groceries and more to poor and middle-class people.

When Ms. Aviv interviewed for the job, she urged Feeding America's board to jump-start efforts to push for broader changes that would curb hunger nationwide. The work is just beginning, but the group has already won a \$4.4 million grant from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation for five three-year pilot programs to help food banks work with other local organizations to take a more holistic approach to the challenges facing families who show up at food banks — for example, by helping them find affordable housing, job training, steady employment, and health care.

## Early Bird

Ms. Aviv wakes up at 4:50 a.m. each morning and starts her day with a 110-minute cardio workout while catching up on the news or reading the latest selection for her book club. She reads *The Washington Post* on the elliptical trainer and often watches CNN and MSNBC or listens to NPR.

"Early in the morning I'm as sharp as I'll ever be," she says. Staying active has always been a big part of her life. She began taking ballet classes at age 3 and continued until her late teens. She ran track and field and was a star netball player in South Africa. Today she and her husband enjoy hiking.

Her drive and decisiveness have helped her champion nonprofit needs while still realizing that organizations need to change their ways, says Dean Zerbe, a former aide to the Senate Finance Committee under Sen. Charles Grassley. Charities found themselves in hot water following scandals involving misuse of donations and bad governance practices. Ms. Aviv, he says, was known as an effective advocate for charities and foundations on Capitol Hill.

"Diana really made sure that Independent Sector and the charities she represented were at the table and that they were listened to — and listened to closely," he says. Mr. Zerbe says her fingerprints were on many of the changes Congress passed, such as extending tax incentives that promote food donations and encourage gifts from individual retirement accounts as well as pushing for a new and expanded Form 990 to promote better transparency and accountability among charities.

### **Staff Cuts**

One of Ms. Aviv's last efforts at Independent Sector was a brainstorming tour with nonprofit leaders around the country as part of an effort called Threads to find out what charities and foundations need to prepare for future challenges.

Today, associations that represent charities and foundations are struggling. In December, Independent Sector cut a quarter of its staff and announced it would refocus its work on three challenges facing nonprofits: globalization, technology, and damage to the environment.

The organization's finances played a role in the changes: It faced a nearly \$1.8 million budget shortfall at the end of 2016. Current CEO Dan Cardinali said he inherited a financially strong organization but added that "any time you go through a significant change, there are financial challenges." Ms. Aviv, he said, had done the "courageous thing of teeing up, when we weren't in crisis, the critical strategic questions of what we needed to do to transition into this next iteration of Independent Sector."

Ms. Aviv faults foundations for giving less to organizations that represent the nonprofit world as a whole and says charities will suffer even more now, with cuts in federal spending likely.

Ms. Aviv is careful not to comment on the specifics of Independent Sector or the groups she worked with closely while she led that organization. Asked whether she is getting what she needs from them in her role as a charity leader, Ms. Aviv's eyes widen and she purses her lips. Asked whether she believes nonprofit associations are moving fast enough to prepare for changes in Washington, she shakes her head no.

"Everybody is feeling quite anxious and worried that their issues are at risk," she says, "And in that kind of situation, more than ever, we need our sector organizations to worry about the charitable tax deduction because we are going to be worrying about the nutrition programs."

### **Narrow Focus**

Ms. Aviv is not without critics. During her tenure at Independent Sector, some philanthropy observers felt the group focused too narrowly on the charitable deduction and issues of immediate self-interest for charities instead of fighting for federal support that would benefit the common good.

Alan Abramson, director of the Center for Nonprofit Management, Philanthropy, and Policy at George Mason University, agrees with that critique but says that uniting around federal spending is a challenge all nonprofit coalitions must jointly undertake to succeed and an unfair task to pin on the leader of one group.

"It's not just Independent Sector and the leadership of Independent Sector that would tackle this," he said. It requires a much broader effort among all nonprofits.

Like a lot of other lobbying groups, Mr. Abramson said, Independent Sector tends to be defense oriented, rather than investing in advocacy that advances a new idea. And foundations can have outsized influence in Independent Sector, he said. "They're footing more of the bill."

Perhaps a sign of the power Ms. Aviv wields, several leaders of nonprofit associations, academics who study philanthropy, and former Independent Sector staff members declined to speak to *The Chronicle* on the record. Some suggested that she was tough to work for, that her management style could at times be top-down, and that turnover was high.



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Pat Read, a 10-year veteran of Independent Sector who served as senior vice president for policy under Ms. Aviv, said that her former boss pushes herself to the ultimate limits and sets very high expectations for her staff.

"I do know that her leadership style didn't work for everybody," said Ms. Read, who now works as a consultant. "For me, it meant I probably performed at my highest level ever in my career."

### People Skills

Kate Maehr first saw Ms. Aviv command a ballroom full of donors about eight years ago. Ms. Maehr has also seen her in action with people from all walks of life at the Greater Chicago Food Depository, which Ms. Maehr has led since 2006.

Ms. Aviv has the ability to connect with and value every voice she hears, says Ms. Maehr. She suspects the skill might be the result of Ms. Aviv's years as a social worker.

"It doesn't matter if you are the CEO of the food bank, somebody who runs a food pantry, somebody who operates a forklift or somebody in line to get food," Ms. Maehr says. "When she's talking to you, she's listening, and she's so thoroughly appreciative of the feedback that she's getting."

A few weeks ago, Ms. Maehr attended a gathering of 12 other food-bank CEOs when someone said quietly, "We never could have predicted the landscape we're in today. To have a CEO with the skill set and abilities that Diana has is something I'm so grateful for."

Says Ms. Maehr: "We have the right leader for the time that we're in."

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