

## How to Organize Hunger-Focused Poetry Competition

### *Poetry X Hunger's Tipsheet*

**Background** – With the creative community in mind, the FAO Liaison Office for North America in conjunction with *Poetry X Hunger* held the first ever 2018 World Food Day Poetry Competition for adult poets in Washington, DC and surrounding counties. The event was a great success -- many fine poems around the 2018 theme of “*Eliminating Hunger by 2025*” were written and submitted. Winning poems were selected and then read at an FAO/NOW-hosted World Food Day reception. Many of the entries can be read on line at the *Poetry X Hunger* Facebook page. To date, entries have been used to open hunger-focused meetings, have been featured in hunger-related newsletters and have been discussed in college classrooms.

This Tipsheet reflects lessons learned during the 2018 Competition and is provided as a guide to colleagues may wish to conduct similar hunger-focused poetry contests. It offers general pointers that can be adopted to your specific situations.

**The first and most important coaching tip is this: Do not be shy about initiating a project that brings poets and their poems to the hunger cause. Chances are very good that members of poetry groups in your city or region will jump at the chance to chime in with their very compelling poems. And, while having personal experience with hunger can be a very, very moving basis for writing poetry about it, others who have not experienced hunger can also write poems that are relevant and haunting.** Experience has also shown that those in the hunger community at food banks, soup kitchens and elsewhere are eager to work with poets.

**Early steps** – Decide if/why a poetry competition would be useful to your hunger work. Would a poetry competition help you reach new stakeholders? Would it rally decision making leaders and implementing communities that have been otherwise hard to excite? Would it enlist the help of young people in the fight against hunger?

Next, decide the age range and/or the geographic area of poets you want to attract. We found that limiting our first, pilot effort to a specific region (Washington, DC and seven surrounding counties) and to poets 18 years of age or older was best for the first contest. If young poets (e.g. ages 5-18) are to be included, parental consent must be included in all announcements and entry requirements. And, the bigger the eligible geographic region, the harder it may be to distribute the call for entries. Also, consider downstream implications, e.g. inviting winning poets who live far away to participate in a celebration may involve travel costs.

Also, decide on the budget for the Competition.

And, as another early step, identify potential partner organizations in the hunger-focused and poetry communities. Reach out to those most likely to be interested in cooperating with you, and assess their level of enthusiasm. Explore with them how they might contribute (in-kind, financially) to a poetry contest. To avoid confusion later, clearly define roles of collaborators as early in the process as possible.

**Next Steps** – In announcing the competition:

- Provide context: Explain why hunger is such a serious issue and why poetry needs to “speak up” about it;
- Describe who is and is not eligible to compete based on location, age groups, etc.;

- Specify any entry requirements such as language of the poem (French, Spanish, English, etc.) length-of-poem limitations (number of lines), or the poetic form such as rhymed, free verse, etc.;
- State if the entry may be hand-written or if it must be typed (single or double-spaced);
- Indicate if submissions should focus on a specific hunger theme, be family-friendly, apolitical, etc.;
- State if submissions must be unpublished. If previously published entries are allowed, ask entrants to indicate that they retain rights to such poems;
- Specify how many poems each poet may submit;
- Describe other info that entrants should submit such as their name, and contact information;
- Explain how entries are to be submitted, i.e. via snail mail or emailed (in text or as an attachment);
- Give an address where the submission should be sent;
- **Boldface the deadline;**
- If possible, state when winners will be announced;
- Describe prizes – certificates, cash or in kind;
- If winners and/or other entrants will be offered the chance to present their poem in a public award ceremony, briefly describe the event;
- Describe what entrants are agreeing to by entering the competition, for example, that they give permission for their work and a portrait photo to be posted on social media;
- List any sponsors on the announcement as well as volunteers;
- Provide contact info for any questions; and
- Perhaps include a short, illustrative poem about hunger.

Once the announcement is ready, distribute it in hard copy and/or electronically to relevant communities. Poetry clubs or groups in your area may be willing to help with distribution. Be ready to answer any questions or to hold a poetry workshop that helps to get things started; local poets may be willing to assist.

**Judging** -- At about this same time as the competition is announced, identify judges. Poets or hunger leaders in the area may be willing to volunteer their time to judge. The number of judges depends on how many poems you expect to receive. Usually one judge will be willing/able to read as many as 30 or so poems. If possible, give the judges an idea of how many poems they will be asked to judge. Explain to the judges what you want them to do, e.g. rank poems, identify one or two winners, etc. And, let the judges know when you need their decision. If funding permits, you may wish to offer an honorarium to judges for their services. Once judging is complete, someone will need to finalize the list of winners.

**Prizes** – Certificates are a popular form of recognition. If you decide to offer cash prizes, decide on amounts. Prizes might also be in the form of cash cards, books, or other items of value.

**Announcing the Winners** -- This can be done with different levels of fanfare. For example, winners may simply be notified and sent their award. More ambitiously, you may want to write a news release announcing the winners. You might also host a celebration of their winning work. Such an event is a great way to showcase to dignitaries and community members how poetry can respond to hunger. Most importantly, be intentional about how you use the winning and other submitted poems after winners are announced.

**Additional Information** -- For more info on running a competition, check with your local poetry clubs or groups. And if further advice is needed, please don't hesitate to contact Dr. Hiram Larew at [poetryxhunger@gmail.com](mailto:poetryxhunger@gmail.com).