



SCHENECTADY INNER CITY MINISTRY
1055 Wendell Avenue Schenectady, New York 12308
*Relating the resources of the churches
to the needs of the city*

Testimony for the Congressional Hunger Commission

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am the Rev. Phillip N Grigsby, and Executive Director of the Schenectady Inner City Ministry (SICM) and a minister in the United Church of Christ (UCC). SICM is a faith based group of congregations that seeks to express the social concern of member congregations.

Context While I see from those who are testifying you have heard much from a state or national perspective. I want to share with you from a local or more grassroots perspective; however this local work indicates and supports various policy proposals.

Schenectady is near by; a little west and north of here; we were once known as the "city that lights and hauls the world" because Thomas Edison got General Electric going; and the American Locomotive Company (ALCO) once produced the largest steam engines in the world. ALCO is gone and GE moved most of its work elsewhere. Schenectady experiences many of the same dramatic demographic shifts as the northeast: loss of economic base, loss of manufacturing; in and out migrations. We are a small city in a larger metro area with pockets of intense poverty. The most recent American Community Survey showed over half (50.6%) of our children living in child poverty. Unfortunately we rank 13th from the bottom in the nation; not a race one wants to win.

Responses to hunger in our community So hunger and food insecurity are no strangers to us. We have three programs that address hunger: a large food pantry, a summer meals program, and a new pilot CSA program. We previously had a fourth. Some years ago we were one of the first sites for the new New York State Nutrition Outreach and Education Program which seeks to expand participation in federal food programs. NY was one of the first states to have such an effort; very commendable. Locally, we led several campaigns to restore lunch to the schools; add school breakfast in all the schools; and significantly expand SNAP (then Food Stamp) participation. We transitioned the program (because we sometimes to that even with a good program) to Catholic Charities and NOEP over the years became statewide. It is ably run by Hunger Solutions whom you have heard from as well.

Due to a variety of factors, our food pantry is the major one in our county, providing about 3/4 of all the temporary and emergency food provided. We moved into an old A and P around the time of the economic downturn in 2008 due to exploding demand. Like others, we help people with "too much month at the end of the money." What is different about our pantry is that we have several hundred volunteers regularly involved in addition to a core staff. We were one of the first to be able to give out fresh produce regularly. Because of our scale we can

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accommodate what is called a "mass distribution" where the regional food bank, a strong partner, sends a tractor trailer load of food which we give out at the end of the month. The need is so great we have people start to line up at 5 in the morning. It reminds me of earlier cheese distributions, and lines from earlier eras.

The major shift is we have gone from an emergency food pantry to really a supplemental food pantry. With state support through HPNAP, the Hunger Prevention Nutrition Assistance Program, we could expand. People also may come once per week for produce as well as baby items.

Still we provide about 12 meals for a family each month. While important, our food pantry and others are not a solution to hunger. As profiled well in "A Place at the Table" our pantry and many others became busier and busier as federal food programs were less available. (We bought a copy of the film and have shown it often in our community). We experienced a real "bump" when SNAP was cut back to pre-stimulus levels. The Governor provided supplemental assistance but there was not way it could make up for the broad loss of purchasing power.

The main policy lesson from our pantry experience is that SNAP is critically important, it is working, it should be expanded and not reduced. The Thrifty Food Plan it is based on is too thrifty; with many others we support a change to other food plans that are more generous. In addition, NY State's HPNAP program has been a model for other states. It supports not only food pantries but also food banks and other hunger fighting efforts. Since the contracts are 5 years in length it provides a stability for programs like ours.

Our summer meal program was an outgrowth of the NOEP experience and our food pantry. Summers became the largest time of demand at the pantry because children were not getting food in school. So 21 years ago we sponsored one site; this year we will have 30 fixed sites and 15 mobile stops. We anticipate providing about 2,000 lunches a day. Two years ago we were the first in upstate to start a mobile program. This year with foundation and United Way support we will have two custom vehicles that each will make 7 or 8 stops a day at various pocket sites.

Unfortunately we are the only SFSP sponsor in our county. Even though we are one of the smallest geographic counties in our state, there used to be several more. When we first started there were start up grants; no longer. There were also equipment grants; no longer. I was reminded to read that the threshold for an open site was once 33%; now it is 50%. The reimbursement for administration covers about a third. Many cannot afford to be sponsors. We can do it because we have had support to grow the program to a size where it theoretically breaks even. We do this for love, not money. And still if we are lucky we provide for 25% of the kids who qualify in the summer. We have found like others that adding activities and certainly partnering with others expands participation. Nobody knows how to get more older youth to come, it is not 'cool.'

The main policy lessons from our SFSP experience are to support our Senator Gillibrand's bill to make changes in the program that will provide for expansion and hopefully gain more sponsors.

- (1) Address the inadequacy of welfare standards and payments. After the welfare shift in 1996, standards and payments became de linked. Even though NY is a more generous state, TANF families receive less than half of the poverty line. Housing payments are ridiculously low and way out of whack with housing costs both upstate and downstate. Proposed measures this year in the state legislature to do a study, immediately increase some housing payments, and index payments could help alleviate hunger.
- (2) NYS Food Policy Council. Started by previous Governors this council deals with important issues but apparently never has had sufficient resources to carry through. When I spoke to them once some time ago I recommended what I thought would be a straight forward, but not simple policy change: use the EBT card system for WIC payments. They said it would be at least five years.
- (3) NYS Anti Hunger Task Force. Our Governor is to be commended for initiating this effort. However, the "jury is out." The group has met but only in private. So far there is no public indication of recommendations; many of us hope this will bear fruit as the group is broadly representative.
- (4) Local food plan. Our county is fortunate to have received support from the CDC for what is called an Alliance for Health. Health departments have shifted from clinics to environmental and policy changes. With us it first brought us a produce cooler so we can give out more at the pantry. Now it is supporting our CSA pilot and the community is at work developing a community wide food system plan. While there is always the danger that such things just 'stay on the shelf' we are hopeful this will bear fruit as well. It would be a way to address food access and see ways to get more healthy and affordable food into food deserts.

Thank you for your consideration.

Rev. Phillip Grigsby
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