



**Testimony of Ms. Nermin Tadros**

**New York City Coalition Against Hunger Food Action Board Member**

**Hearing Before the National Commission on Hunger**

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My name is Nermin Tadros and I am a member of the Food Action Board of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. The Board engages food insecure New Yorkers in telling their stories and working to improve public policies in order to end hunger. I am testifying on behalf of the approximately 1.4 million New Yorkers who live in food insecure households. I want to first thank the National Commission on Hunger for inviting me to testify here today.

I live on Staten Island with my husband of 10 years, Medhat. We arrived in the United States in 2010, from Egypt. We are grateful that America took us in and we are desperate to work hard and get ahead, but the reality is that we have often faced hunger.

We want to work hard and achieve the American dream, but even though I have a bachelor's degree in political science and economics, I have only been able to get part-time, blue-collar work. I previously worked for a number of years part-time at a major nationwide retail store, always asking for longer hours. At most, they gave me 12 hours per week of work if I was lucky. This meant my husband and I were often behind on the utility bills because we needed to buy food. I was paid \$8.00 per hour, and then after my bosses agreed my performance was good, they raised it to only \$8.20 per hour. After I questioned why the raise was so small, they reduced my number of hours. I believe some companies purposely keep employees only part-time to

avoid paying benefits as well as to continuously bring in newer, younger workers, who are paid even less. This seems to be a common practice, unfortunately.

Currently, my husband and I both work as many hours as we can per week, delivering food in trucks at night, earning \$8.75 per hour. I still struggle. Unfortunately, this happens not only to me but to so many other working people I know. My husband and I each get about 20 hours of work per week, earning about \$700 per person each month, or \$1,400 for the two of us. Even in the relatively low-rent borough of Staten Island, our rent is \$1,100, leaving only \$300 per month for food, clothing, transportation, and every other expense. Our Metrocards alone, to get to and from work, cost \$5.50 per round trip, equaling 63 percent of one hour's pay. Basic math explains why we don't have enough money for food.

I eventually applied by mail to the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, but the application process was horrific. The agency lost my supporting documents. Then, they lost my documents a second time. The third time, we spent \$12 dollars, quite a sum of money for us, to Fed Ex our paperwork to HRA, but we were told the documents arrived a few hours after their deadline, and we were denied benefits. This bureaucracy was worse than even Egyptian bureaucracy. I applied again, and we were finally granted SNAP benefits.

Even after getting benefits, the City continued to hassle us. They repeatedly told us that, because we didn't have children, we were so called Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDS) and that we had to take extra time to document that we were working. When our employers, against our will, reduced our hours of work, the City made it sound as if it was somehow *our* fault and that we didn't want to work. This treatment was humiliating and insulting, and upset us greatly. I am glad that the City now makes it easier for so-called ABAWDs to get food help, but we still have to repeatedly re-certify our SNAP eligibility with the City.

My husband and I now receive \$180 in SNAP benefits a month. We also go to food pantries to get extra food most months.

Meanwhile, every trip to the supermarket is an extreme balancing act, which means I can only buy food that's on sale. Some weeks I can't buy protein, such as meat or seafood, if it's not on sale. In order for my SNAP to last until the end of the month, I have no other choice.

Basic math again explains why we struggle. Two people get around \$180 worth of SNAP per month, or \$90 per person, divided by 30 days a month, so the balance for each person daily is three dollars. This is three dollars for three meals- a dollar a meal! I understand that USDA guidelines say that SNAP is supposed to be supplemental, and that I am supposed to use other money for food, but what if I don't have other money?

What would you buy for a dollar a meal? How could you feed a working body on a dollar a meal and afford a life? It's impossible! I have to buy what is a dollar a meal which makes healthy food like meat, seafood, fruits, and vegetables tough to purchase. I want to eat healthier, but food is expensive. These are not choices I want to make, but they are the only choices I have.

I have to think a million times before swiping my EBT card for cheese that costs \$6 a pound or some cold cuts. I am very grateful that America took in me and my husband, but the sad reality is, that by some measures, Egypt provides more support than America to aid low-income families.

It's just too hard for working people to survive in America today. And it's not only me who thinks this – I bet this is what every working person who relies on SNAP thinks. It should not be this way. I should not have to choose between food and rent. Or have to question myself before I buy food.

It's not healthy. And it's just wrong.

And in New York City alone, there are 1.7 million people who rely on SNAP, just like me. Most are working people, just like me and my husband. Many are kids and seniors. They are my friends, family, and neighbors. Some of them, other Food Action Board members, are here with me today.

We all want higher wages, but I worry that, if the minimum wage is raised, we would lose all our SNAP benefits, my husband and I would be worse off. We must raise the minimum wage but also ensure that income cut offs for SNAP will rise at the same time in order to ensure that wages

hikes increase, not decrease, the ability of workers to feed their families. Only when wages rise high enough for a family to be able to fully feed their family should SNAP eligibility be ended for that family.

It should also be quicker, easier, and less humiliating for people to get SNAP, and the benefits should be raised to enable families to obtain a full supply of healthier food. I think stores should be further subsidized to give special discounts to people who purchase food with SNAP. In a country as wealthy as America, no one should go hungry.