

Good morning, my name is Clarissa Doutherd, I'm currently working as Executive Director for Parent Voices Oakland – an organization that advocates for affordable, accessible, quality child care for low-income families.

It is such an honor to be here providing testimony today, and I want to thank the Commission for the opportunity, as well as my colleague and friend Sarah Palmer.

Growing up in the 80s, I watched my mother really struggle. We were often homeless. With no money for child care, and with no one to watch my baby sister, my brother and I she couldn't keep the few jobs she was able to land. We cycled on and off AFDC or (spell out) for years. My mother received food stamps,

and at that time - the process was that you got a voucher in the mail, you went to a food stamp redemption center and cashed your food stamps to receive booklets of different colored coupons that you could use to buy food. The centers were filthy, with extremely long lines. It was a day-long process. The food stamps didn't come close to feeding us, and when my mom got low we'd start making rounds at food pantries, and the bakery thrift stores which sold aging baked goods like wonderbread and twinkies.

I had a deep sense of shame, waiting in those lines – going to food closets – and being stared at each time we were in a grocery store check-out. I remember people staring as my mother pulled out books of food stamps. I swore that when I was old enough to take care of myself, I would never experience the humiliation of poverty, and the sense of hopelessness that I knew as a child. From age 15 on I worked two, sometimes three jobs.

As much love, respect and admiration I had for my mother – I wanted to create a different life for myself.....I held on to the belief that if I was responsible, and worked really hard there was no way I would experience the crippling poverty of my youth.

And while that was true much of the time, I learned that this reductionist way of thinking simply wasn't reality.

In 2006, I was 25 with a full time job as a bookkeeping and accounting consultant for small businesses in San Francisco. I had my own apartment in the City, and was making a good living. When I became

pregnant with my son Xavier that year, I tripled my work load and diligently saved every penny that I could in preparation for the huge life change. I moved out of my apartment, and rented a small room to save even more money. I worked literally until the day I went into labor. And then life happened. After Xavier was born my housing situation fell through taking a good chunk of my savings with it, and of course everything cost much more than I'd anticipated. Without any family or friends who could help, we were homeless. The last of my money went to diapers, baby supplies, and gas to get back and forth from appointments. I was nursing Xavier, but had to carefully ration all of my food. I was scared, hungry, and lonely every day. I had no idea that I qualified for food stamps or WIC. I didn't know where to go to apply for them, I was just in a sleep deprived panicked daze. Things went on this way until Xavier was 4 months old. I began looking for a job and talked to a family child care provider in my neighborhood who explained how to apply for TANF, CalFresh, and WIC until I got a job. She literally saved our lives. Getting CalFresh and WIC was a tremendous help. I had to supplement breast feeding Xavier with formula, and he was allergic to most brands. I couldn't afford the formula he was able to digest without support – but I could purchase it with the WIC voucher. This meant I had money for a babysitter and to buy gas when I needed to go on job interviews. It meant that I didn't have to choose between a healthy meal for myself and diapers. It was a rough year, at first I worked part time with no sick leave or paid time off, so keeping appointments to recertify or turn in paperwork across town was extremely stressful because it meant we couldn't make rent. Xavier has asthma, which was severe in his infancy, so any time off had to be saved in case my baby had a medical emergency.

Eventually, I was able to advance at my job and be promoted to full-time employment, when Xavier was about a 1 year old. I finally made enough money to get off all public assistance, except my child care subsidy. It was the hardest, scariest, most stressful year of my life. I began to understand my mother, and some of what she went through.

Having a new baby should not mean that parents fall through the cracks. Our situation could have been so much worse. I was fortunate to find informal support through an experienced family child care provider who had been through the same situation when her children were little. There were many points of intervention where systems and services could have worked to support my family and ensure we could stabilize more quickly than we had. Meeting families where they are at – child care centers,

the maternity ward, home visiting programs, and churches to provide critical information and assistance with accessing programs. Despite my early experiences, I still went hungry as a first-time mom from a lack of knowledge. Many parents are overwhelmed and simply do not know where to begin. Also, if I had known to ask for information on a home visiting program, as an at-risk mother without stable housing – this could have been another place of intervention. My son and I were in crisis for months, and the emotional impact this had on my baby was significant. My recommendation for the Commission is to 1) continue listening to the stories and experiences of those impacted by poverty to understand where policy makers can fill in the gaps. There are critical moments where we can maximize our engagement with families and provide helpful information and resources. Families are the experts. They can provide great information on when these moments are, what information and resources are most helpful, and how to best deliver these.

2) Investment. Having multiple supports working together meant I was able to stabilize completely in two years. Much of the Federal and State Funding for many of these supports have been cut.

Families deserve an opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty with dignity, and we know that providing a strong safety net decreases the type of systemic, deep, generational poverty my family experienced.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to tell my story today.