

Shanti Prasad, Community Mobilization Coordinator, Alameda County Community Food Bank
Public Testimony at National Hunger Commission Hearing in Oakland, CA
Wednesday, June 15, 2015

Thank you very much to the Commission for coming to Oakland to hear our voices about food security and poverty. My name is Shanti Prasad. I'm the Community Mobilization Coordinator on the Advocacy Team at Alameda County Community Food Bank. The Food Bank serves 20 percent of the 1.5 million residents in our county through our 240 member agency network. I've worked in food access and policy in New York City at Slow Food USA, Food Systems Network NYC, and Brooklyn Food Coalition, I have a master's degree in Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, and I've never experienced a day of hunger in my life. Nor have I had to miss school or work to stand in line at a soup kitchen.

However, this is not because I was not at risk of being hungry. So let me back up to before my professional experience, before I went to college, before my work as a community organizer and advocate, to when I lived below the poverty line in Fresno, California, the agricultural capital of America. I was a welfare kid from birth to age 16 in the 1970s and 80s. Unlike the state of social safety net and nutrition programs now, I was lucky. I am one of the success stories because the social safety net prevented me from going hungry, which allowed me to focus on learning and growing.

My maternal grandparents were farm workers in the 1940s through 1960s and were able to eventually live a modest middle class lifestyle and raise four children. It was a low-income neighborhood, but they had three properties, which is where I spent much of my childhood.

My father, an immigrant from India and the oldest of ten children, was struggling through graduate school when I was born. My mom, a cancer survivor and, once I turned one, a single mother, was able to attend Fresno State when I was little because we had access to excellent child care, school loans, good health care, food stamps, and I had a free and healthful school lunch that was cooked on site. Farmers markets were affordable and we often bought fresh fruits and vegetables there. My mom had time to cook because she wasn't working two to three jobs at a time, and there was always the security blanket of a block of government cheese.

Life was still difficult; I still live with some trauma from the stigma of poverty. But I had a loving family who were not always stressed out about how we would eat. I would not be where I am today without a robust social safety net, including SNAP and healthy school meals. My mom would not have been able to go to college and graduate and my dad would not have been able to get his MBA, serve at the United Nations, become the first person at UC Berkeley Law to receive a doctorate in International Human Rights Law, and go on to help many people in his community and beyond.

My dad, Dr. Maya Prasad, wanted to be here today, but he's mostly homebound these days, so I'll relay this brief message from him: Every child in this world is entitled to what any other would have. Why is this not true? When I see a child suffer, it is like seeing my own child suffer. Is there a reason for not treating every child as you would like to treat your own? So far, I have not seen one.

I've met so many people this last year in the Bay Area and in the San Joaquin Valley who are suffering badly in deep poverty because of cuts in programs. I met one woman at a church soup kitchen in Oakland who had recently lost her housing and is living in her truck with two dogs. She receives Supplemental Security Income benefits (SSI), which means that her maximum benefit amount is \$889 and she is not eligible for SNAP benefits. She often goes hungry, but what scares her most is being harassed or attacked when she looks for a place to use the bathroom at night.

There have been a lot of great recommendations today to increase food security, so I'll only say that I agree strongly with them, especially improving access to school meal programs and matching SNAP funds at farmers markets.