



Thank you to members of the National Commission on Hunger for inviting my testimony today. My name is Kathy Underhill, and I have the privilege of being the Executive Director of Hunger Free Colorado. I would like to also thank Cate Blackford who leads our Child Nutrition work for her help in drafting this testimony. It is particularly meaningful to me to be here, as I am one of the millions of Americans who have been helped by the Food Stamp Program. I have experienced hunger and needed to ask for help.

With today's heat and being in Texas, it reminded me of a past summer vacation spent with my husband, Randy, and two young children—Maggie, then a first grader, and Becca, then a preschooler—on Galveston Beach where my husband grew up. The girls began building sandcastles close to the water's edge. After a time, the tide began coming in—and at first, they didn't notice that the water was carrying away their castles, a grain at a time. Once they realized, Becca and Maggie scrambled to add more sand to save their work. You all know how this ended...in tears. I took each girl by the hand and walked them down the beach for a history lesson. I told them about the hurricane of 1900 which left Galveston Island utterly destroyed. We visited the sea wall that was built after that storm, and I explained how they raised the grade of the island to protect it from future hurricanes. I suggested that maybe they would want to raise their castles to a higher grade and build a sea wall, too.

Today, we as a nation need to raise the floor of our expectations and invest in the infrastructure that will protect our families from disaster. Our current system leaves too many people vulnerable to life's hurricanes. As a country, we tell ourselves tossing people life preservers—food donations—is the best we can do. But it doesn't have to be that way.

As the National Commission on Hunger, you are in the position to help our country step up with ambition and show how building on the frame of our current infrastructure would help protect us all. When millions of Americans are going to bed hungry, they don't need a life preserver. They need a sea wall. We just have to choose to build it.

Hunger is one of the most interesting and infuriating puzzles I've worked on, in part because we understand that hunger in this country is solvable, unnecessary and unjust, and yet it affects too many. At Hunger Free Colorado, we believe that nutritious food is a basic human right. On a tight budget, people often have to make heart-wrenching choices between keeping a roof over their head or filling prescriptions, instead of buying the food they need. They may have to turn to already-strained charitable and faith-based groups distributing emergency food, just to make ends meet. If they happen to call a rural Colorado community home, far from the resources often found in our urban centers, these challenges are only compounded by long distances and fewer options.

Hunger can also be an infuriating puzzle because it is also an "everything" issue. No matter what core issue folks care about—whether its education reform, health care, the economy or family stability—hunger is part of it. I'm a believer in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which states that you must fulfill basic needs such as food before any higher functions occur. Science backs this theory up by showing us when there's not enough food, the brain allocates the limited dietary energy in this order: (1) towards critical bodily function, (2) to height and weight gain, and if there's enough left, the remaining dietary energy is then, lastly allocated (3) to brain

function. In layman's terms: in the presence of hunger, not much else matters or occupies your thoughts. Just skip the rest of your meals today if you have doubts about the accuracy of this theory.

Today I will share stories to show you the face of hunger in Colorado and talk to you about specific gaps in our infrastructure that we need to address. Please know these are intended to highlight both the need and feasibility of large-scale investments that could take us leaps forward in the fight against hunger.

The Face of Hunger in Colorado

We recently beta tested a new survey in Colorado, gaining invaluable insight from those who turn to food pantries during times of need. Through eight pantries in the Denver metro area, we connected with more than 600 people. The results were eye-opening and illustrate both how important our emergency food system is, but all-too-clearly how it cannot eradicate hunger.

We learned that even though more than half of households have at least one working adult, 78% visit the pantry weekly or monthly, 86% had visited that pantry before, and 58% have gotten help from that pantry for more than one year. Families want food that pantries don't have—namely fresh or frozen meat and milk. We also found that many customers need specific food due to medical necessity, allergies or religious reasons. ***Despite the frequency and length of time these families have been visiting food pantries, nearly half reported going to bed hungry and more than one third reported skipping a meal so that someone else in the house could eat instead.***

The scale of Colorado's hunger problem is well beyond these 600 families. I live in a state where one in five children may not know when or where they will find their next meal. One in four of our working families struggle to put enough food on the table. The federal nutrition programs are a bastion of hope and fortitude to these Coloradans, but without reinforcing them, enormous gaps will persist, and children, parents and seniors will continue to go to bed hungry.

We run a statewide food resource hotline and recently received a call from a 70-year-old widow living in a mostly affluent suburb of Denver who, one day, rode two buses and walked half a mile to a food pantry only to be turned away empty-handed because she didn't hold the same religious beliefs as the pantry volunteers. She was defeated, exhausted and needed help. We were able to provide her with validation and additional referral resources. But the truth is, we see folks who are defeated and exhausted like this every day, all day. It is not fair. Both charitable and governmental programs must be designed with those impacted by hunger first and foremost. Poor treatment just because you are poor is not fair.

Colorado's Hungry Children

Much of our work at Hunger Free Colorado has been focused on increasing access to child nutrition programs because children are the most likely to live in households struggling with hunger. We passed one of the country's most aggressive mandates for serving school breakfast after the first bell and have seen participation jump by 1.7 million more breakfasts served in its first year of implementation. We also increased the number of afterschool snacks and supper sites from 393 in 2009 to 610 operating in 2015.

These accomplishments were only possible due to the commitment and action of organizations and communities across Colorado—state and county government agencies; foundations; municipalities; nonprofit, community and faith-based organizations; schools and school districts; corporations and local businesses; and countless community members. Each rallied behind a shared vision and plan to implement viable solutions and remove roadblocks to access. We continue to work in the same vein to target high-priority areas in outlying parts of Colorado, and partner with state agencies, the USDA, local churches, schools and community organizations to establish new summer meal sites. I am thrilled to report that there are now 31 summer meal sites in 29 rural communities across the Eastern Plains, the San Luis Valley, the highest points in the Colorado Rockies and along the Western Slope, a drastic increase compared to only eight sites in 2014. But, in many parts of rural Colorado, summer remains to be the most difficult time for families and there is much more to be done.

Summer is a time when Colorado parents worry about being able to stretch the family grocery budgets to cover the breakfast and lunch that their kids may have been getting at school. Around the state, more than 530 summer meal sites served nearly 1.5 million meals last summer. That's nearly double the number of meals served in 2009.

The implementation of innovative strategies and best practices was key to strong growth in summer meal participation in Colorado. During the summer of 2014, mobile feeding sites increased by 18%, allowing more children to be reached in locations where they naturally congregate. Sponsors were encouraged to extend service throughout the summer; only two (of 76) sponsors participated exclusively in June, with 33 sponsors continuing through August. The Colorado Department of Education and Hunger Free Colorado launched a coordinated promotional campaign across Colorado—from statewide news coverage to advertising on buses and in AMC movie theaters.

I share stories of the work behind these initiatives and the strong resulting growth, because ***despite those enormous efforts, only about 1 in 10 of the kids who were eligible for free/reduced-price lunch participated in summer meals last year.*** We worry that summer meals may never work for these children or their families.

At over 104,000 square miles, Colorado is a big state. We have high concentrations of people along the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains and other pockets with larger populations, but the vast majority of our state is rural. That means many places in our state face high barriers to ensuring all our

kids have the fuel they need to grow and learn in the summer. Even in communities with more than a hundred kids who are eligible for free/reduced-price lunch in one census block, there are often many reasons that a traditional or mobile summer meal site isn't feasible.

Children in rural Colorado are far less likely than children in urban areas to live within walking distance of a site. Much of rural Colorado falls below the eligibility threshold of 50% of kids being eligible for free/reduced-price lunch.

We were contacted just this week by a woman in Milliken, Colorado, asking how her elementary school could serve summer meals. In her school of 532 kids, 47% are eligible for free/reduced-price lunch, but to offer these meals, they either would need to run a closed program where kids have to enroll or convince another 20 families to apply for free/reduced-price lunch. Hundreds of kids in this small rural community could benefit if these barriers did not exist.

In places that *are* eligible, the location of the meals is a critical factor. Sometimes, even when summer meals are within a walkable or bike-able distance from home, it can still mean that kids have to cross highways and other unsafe obstacles to reach a summer meal site. Transportation barriers involved in getting to and from a site are the biggest reason children don't participate in the summer meals program.

Even if the threshold and individual barriers don't exist, rural communities in Colorado are less likely to have community organizations that can support the planning and implementation of a summer meal site. They have fewer facilities or vendors to make healthy meals. They may not have the workforce to operate a site if the total time operating the program and the wages for doing so are too low to make the job appealing. All of these reasons point to the inherent difficulties in tailoring the summer meals program to Colorado's rural communities. This leaves a significant number of Colorado children unable to access the same resources as their more urban counterparts. Forty one percent of Colorado children live in rural or semi-rural counties.

This is one of the reasons why I'm here today. **I urge you to recommend the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) for Children be made permanent.** As I'm sure you know, the Summer EBT program is an exciting demonstration project that has shown great success in overcoming barriers to the Summer Food Service Program. The pilot project, first funded by Congress in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, has shown clear results in alleviating very low food security among children during the summer, the most severe form of childhood hunger. A rigorous evaluation by the USDA indicated that Summer EBT for Children found:

- Reductions in the most severe form of childhood hunger by 33%;
- Children ate more healthfully. Children in the demonstration project ate 13% more fruits and vegetables, 30% more whole grains and 10% more dairy; and
- Participation rates skyrocketed from 16% to 30% (compared with traditional summer meals) when families were invited to participate; participation reached an astounding 75% when the program was structured as an opt-out.

If Congress were to make the Summer EBT for Children permanent, it would ensure hungry kids have access to food year-round, regardless of where they live.

At the same time, **I urge you to recommend lowering the eligibility threshold for open summer meal sites from 50% to 40%**, so more communities have the option of offering their kids healthy meals and great programming when school is out.

Strengthening the Food Stamp Program

When we conducted our food pantry survey, we found that only half of the surveyed households have ever applied for food stamps, with more than a quarter thinking others needed it more than them, another quarter saying it was too much hassle to apply and 6% not believing in government help.

It is sad because the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps, was designed to prevent and eliminate hunger, but instead has been turned into a political rhetorical device used to further stigmatize low-income Americans. The reality is that food stamps invest in hard-working families, children and seniors, because food fuels learning, productivity and better, healthier lives. Protecting and strengthening SNAP would be an investment in stronger, thriving communities and a better future for all Coloradans.

The program serves as an economic bridge, helping people get back on their feet. Most Colorado families and individuals, on average, only use food stamps for 11 months, according to the USDA. And, a majority of able-bodied recipients in Colorado work, and those unable to work—more than 300,000 children, seniors and individuals who are disabled—are the ones benefiting most from the program.

Every dollar matters to those trying to make ends meet, and food stamps serve as bulwark against hunger for families who are living paycheck to paycheck. For some, food stamps may be all that they have to buy groceries due to their wages needing to cover other basics like rent, electricity, transportation, child care and medications. For others, it may act as a supplemental, allowing them to purchase foods that meet their dietary needs or more nutritious food that, otherwise, they could not purchase. When benefit cuts occurred in November 2013—robbing Peter to pay Paul in the federal budget—we saw calls to our statewide food resource hotline spike.

We know that food stamps work; at previous hearings testimony has refreshed your historical memories. Rather than cutting a program known for low overhead, few instances of fraud and a history of helping Americans meet their most basic needs, we need to streamline access and eligibility to food stamps and invest more dollars, so that families experiencing hunger can use normal channels of commerce to purchase food which is most appropriate to them and their families.

We know that our emergency food system is a critical resource, but it is currently being swamped by need in our community. It is a less efficient system that duplicates our existing food retail infrastructure, as well as struggles to provide Americans with the types of food they need in sufficient quantity. It also relies on donations, government commodities and their administrative contract dollars, and many volunteers to operate.

SNAP is a highly efficient system. It brings additional resources to our existing food retail infrastructure, allows people to purchase the food that is culturally and medically appropriate, while also bolstering the capacity of smaller, rural communities to sustain their grocery stores and providing gains to the local economy. Food stamps should not be used as a political football. Instead, robustly fund it, and interwoven with child nutrition programs, we could end hunger in our great nation. Food stamps are a sea wall; food pantries are a life preserver. While members of Congress are calling for cuts on entitlement programs, I can share from my own personal experience that the last thing you feel when filling out forms, being asked personal questions and laying your life open for a stranger is entitled. It is the most humbling of experiences. **I urge to maintain current funding, food choice and eligibility requirements for SNAP.**

In summary, I ask you all to consider a few specific measures, as part of a larger effort to protect our children, seniors and all others who are battered by life's hurricanes, to invest in the infrastructure that will shield all of us from hunger, because we're all at our best when we have enough to eat.

Specifically:

- Fully fund our existing nutrition programs
- Make Summer EBT permanent
- Make the Summer Food Service Program year-round and reduce the geographic eligibility threshold to 40% of kids eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.
- Protect SNAP at current funding, food choice and eligibility requirements.

I could continue on with further recommendations. I have been doing this work a long time, and it's obvious to those of us on the ground what works and what doesn't. My children were caught by surprise that their sand castles were being washed away. We are not. The data, facts and stories are plentiful – we know what happens when the food stamp program is carried away, grain by grain as it has been. A little cut here, a little cut there is simply not acceptable. Those seemingly “small cuts” have a profound and real impact in our neighbors' lives.

The real question we need the National Hunger Commission to answer is: What is the role of the federal government in ending hunger?

I call for this bi-partisan committee to agree and publish their conclusions on this.

Because that question is the root of everything you have heard or will hear during your time together. I believe that the federal government should play the leading role. I am a pragmatist, and I understand we can't have it all.

But, now is not the time to think small. Now is the time for you to think big and truly end hunger in America. My America builds seawalls to save people from hurricanes. It doesn't simply say that, if you live on an island, you know your risks, you get what you get and are on your own. It invests in its citizens. It is humane.

Can any member of Congress come walk a day in my shoes, look a hungry child or a hungry senior in the eyes and still believe that federal nutrition programs aren't worth the investment? Do not insulate yourself in ignorance.

Hunger is here, we can solve it, and we must.