



**National Commission on Hunger Public Hearing  
Public Testimony**

June 26, 2015 ♦ 9:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.  
The La Fe Culture and Technology Center  
El Paso, Texas

**Commissioner: This will begin the public testimony component of our hearing this afternoon. We have the next several hours. La Fe has been very generous with their building and with their time, allowing us, we got here at 7:30 this morning and the La Fe staff have been just phenomenal to work with, not only today but yesterday, being able to meet with members of the La Fe community. So we're eager to hear from you. We've been traveling. We've had public testimony in places all over the country, so we're very excited about hearing from community members today. We have eleven people that have signed up for testimony. We're going to give each of you 3 to 5 minutes and then Commissioners will ask you questions, if they have any. Otherwise, then if there are no questions then we'll ask the next person to come up and submit testimony. This is on record and I will remind you that this will be recorded and transcribed and made available to the public on the Commission website, which is [www.HungerCommission.rti.org](http://www.HungerCommission.rti.org). So you will be, everybody will be able to be privileged to hear what you have to say today. David Sanchez is going to be the first to provide us testimony this afternoon. David, if you would, in all providing testimony, if you'll tell us if you're representing an organization, if you'll let us know what organization that is and your role with that organization, though, obviously, you don't have to be representing one and that's fine, too. Thank you.**



## PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #1

Participant #1: Great, thank you, guys for allowing me to speak today. My name is David Sanchez. I represent [Aliviane,] Inc., with the Prevention Resource Center 10. I am the Regional Evaluator for far west Texas, which is El Paso, Hudspeth, Culberson, Brewster, Jeff Davis, and Presidio. I've practiced that many times, so I know all six counties I represent [laughter] but I come to you not only as a representative but a concerned parent and a community member, as well. Being a young father and a recipient of Food Stamps myself, when I was first found out I was going to be a young dad, I needed services and I was able to get that through the Health and Human Service Commission and through the Department of State Health Services, so I know what it feels like to stand in the line and be at the bottom, at the very bottom, and finally get at the very top, what I would consider the very top. I started in the nonprofit organization of Planned Parenthood back in the day and, you know, I was an outreach worker, training specialists, doing presentations, worked my way up to working with numbers and statistics. So here I am sitting in front of you and going to give you a little bit of that information that I know of what's going on in El Paso. So as you know, we are tri-state area. We have New Mexico, Texas, and Chihuahua, Mexico. With El Paso County alone we have about 800,000 individuals. With Fort Bliss and with Juarez, Mexico, we have about 2 million people that come in and out of this area. So that's a lot of individuals. It's not just a small pocket that you might see as a city of 660,000. It's close to 2 million people that come in and out of this area. One of the other things I would like to mention is that let's put our attention back on the people, the people that we're actually talking about here today. Twenty-one percent of all the families here in El Paso are living in poverty; 41% of those families that are led by a single female are in poverty. So what that tells me, when you hear the stat of 44% of all the children that are born here in El Paso County are born to a single mother, that tells me that virtually half of all the children that are born in this county alone are born into poverty. We have to do something about this, guys. We have to make this an issue that is not only something that we see at an academic level, at a research level, at a statistic and a number level, but down to the grass roots and person level. We need to visit with these individuals in their homes. This is a center stage for that, Sayvun Novario was founded and it was the whole representation of community [that] was founded here in this neighborhood. We have Father [inaudible] visiting the families in their homes and in back alleys here in this area before in-home visitation was even an evidence-based treatment or was even an evidence-based method, he was doing that. He was walking door-to-door and finding out what was going on in this community.

But what about public assistance? Here, in El Paso, 42% of children under the age of 18 are receiving some kind of public assistance. In May of 2015 in El Paso County alone 95 children were receiving some kind of SNAP benefit. That's 95 children. If you go even further, let's talk about the rural communities that we have. I'm not sure if you guys had the benefit of going out to our outskirts but we consist of smaller towns and smaller cities. [In]



this county alone, we have 320 Colonias in this county. A Colonia, if you don't know what that actually means, it represents that Spanish word that means a community or a neighborhood. The Office of Secretary of State defines a Colonia as a residential area along the Texas/Mexico border that lacks some of the most basic necessities. Those basic necessities include potable water, sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, and safe, sanitary housing. Their capital income is about \$16,000. What they make annually in that, generally speaking, in that area of the 320 different Colonias, what they make annually is anywhere from \$3,000.00 to \$6,000.00 a year. That is a very, very, very low income for the people that we have. So a lot of their streets aren't even paved. So a lot of the times we want to go provide services out to this population and we have a really hard time getting out there because these areas get flooded and we have to basically just say, "No," sometimes. So that's one of the problems that we have. So I'll end this with some comments. As I was sitting here writing up some of these stats, I just want to let you know that this is a community that we excel at everything we do. We were some of the first ones to open our doors when Katrina hit New Orleans. We opened the doors and said, "Come on in." El Paso had a lot of individuals that came in from there. We send a lot of our laborers, if you think about our labor force and the way our community works together, we send out people from El Paso Electric to New York when there is no electricity up there. We send our people out. And one of the last things I'll mention and it's kind of like a little plug. We were one of the first to be one of those first cities in the nation that became smoke-free. So as you walk around El Paso [laughter] I see a clap over here, as you walk around El Paso, you go to our restaurants, if you ate here, you ate in clean air, except, you know, some of the other stuff that might be out there [laughter] but you ate in a clean restaurant with some clean air. You didn't have somebody sparking up a cigarette next to you, so that's awesome.

So let's keep this momentum going, as community members that I have behind me, and I know they're listening to me and they're like, "Okay, we've done great things." Let's keep it going. Let's keep it moving. I don't know exactly the entire details of what you all are doing here today, other than to listening to some of our testimonies but we have a momentum moving in El Paso. We've been the first for a lot of things. Just look at our basketball team. Way back in the day look at Glory Road. We were the first. So we could be the first at ending hunger. We could. We could be the first at providing awesome services to these families that really need them and provide them the meals that they need. I love the summer program. I think that's great. I love the fact that we're opening up schools, so that they can go in and they can still eat lunch. Because without that school lunch some kids don't eat. It's just a matter of fact. So it's my passion to be a community member. My parent hat is also on. You heard a little bit about that. So I represent everything in perspective of community, organization, and as a parent. So thank you, guys for your time.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: Thank you.**



**Commissioner: Thank you very much.**

**Commissioner: Does anybody have any questions or comments? [applause]**

**Commissioner: I have a question, if that's all right.**

Participant #1: Sure, sure, not a problem.

Commissioner: You don't have to answer it, if you don't want to.

Participant #1: That's okay.

**Commissioner: We've been hearing a lot about the Colonias. We want to go and visit a Colonia outside of, well, outside of the city of El Paso. We went over to New Mexico to look at a Colonia and what hasn't really been answered for us yet or hasn't really been discussed is why hasn't the county of El Paso provided infrastructure, sewage, running water, electricity to the, over 360-something Colonias. You say this is a community that works together and collaborates. So what's going on with providing services to people in the county itself?**

Participant #1: Definitely, I hear what you're saying. One of the things that you got to remember is that each one of these areas has different cities. So there's different city governments involved and once it gets to that political level, some of that political game starts to jump in and I think I heard a comment here earlier about, you know, not getting too political in nature and that's basically what happens. Some of the things that we try to do, like let me give you an example of some of the ordinances that are put into place, like the smoke-free ordinance. That's a city thing. Once it becomes a county thing, it becomes a different thing because then you have to go to the Commissioners. Once it becomes a county thing, then it becomes a state thing and then we've got to go through the state and the Senate and it becomes a bigger issue. That's when we have to take it to the state level. That's why we have such a barrier, is that we need to get our state representatives involved to see it as an issue. Not all of them take their time out of their day to do what you did and come out here today. That's what we need them to do, to step up to the game and support us in our efforts.

**Commissioner: Great, thank you for your time. We appreciate it.**

**Commissioner: Thank you very much.**

Participant #1: Thank you.



## PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #2

**Commissioner: The next person is Gloria Martinez. Is Gloria present? Okay, Dr. Gina Núñez?**

Participant #2: Good afternoon, it's a pleasure to speak to you today. I've asked one of my students, Corina Marruto [phonetic], to sit with me. She's very shy but hopefully, her voice will come through because she helped conduct research for my testimony today. So I'll be speaking about food insecurity in Colonias and my goal is to give voice to women, unauthorized, undocumented women, single mothers, and our elderly women, who cannot drive. So instead of giving you statistics, I want to share with you that 2 weeks ago, through an organization, a partnership that I have as a UTEP Professor, as an Associate Applied Anthropologist, and as now Interim Director of Women's Studies, I've partnered with the Wise Latina International and we came up with a study where we cite the Dallas Women's Foundation. On average, Latinas in El Paso get paid 49¢ for what a man earns in the United States of America. So I'd like to begin with that premise because I would argue that undocumented women earn even less. So I would like to talk about poverty, single motherhood, immigration status, and the elderly. Where we provide ethnographic narratives that include women's descriptions of their strategies to try to mediate food insecurity by relying on their neighbors, friends, family, nonprofit organizations and communities of faith. The theme of feeling alone in our own little world is a testimony of these women's narratives. Many of these women have to rely on their neighbors since poverty is tied so intricately with food insecurity. So the topics of shame and social stigma are interwoven in these women's narratives. Ethnography allows us to do participant observation, to do analysis of their narratives, to zoom into the micro-interactions that take place in these households and in the public spaces in which food insecurity is negotiated. So the seasonality of many of farm workers and our seasonal workers means that they don't always have the food that they, they can't always afford the food they often times harvest. Many times they struggle to rent or buy food. They are often times competing because they don't have credit. So if you are a population without credit, nobody will sell you food on credit. They often times have to rely on their networks. Often times their social and physical distance from urban centers, the lack of infrastructure in their communities, their poorly paid seasonal jobs, and the few and far in between jobs available contribute to their poverty and their food insecurity. Also, the lack of infrastructure in these communities make it very difficult for larger businesses to come in and provide services in these communities and for other agencies, who cannot go into areas that are unpaved.

So economic resources, lack of transportation, [and] the lack of steady income impact the daily access [to] food. As one woman said, "I was in need of food and was denied public assistance, so being who I am, of course, I started asking a family here and there, you know. If they had extra food, could we please have it?" They're like, "Of course." Where [inaudible] food and financial resources have been depleted, she relied on food from her neighbors, her



family and friends who can share the food that they had left over. The majority of these contributions consisted of canned food and anything else that they had already cooked or no longer wanted to eat themselves. Another woman went and volunteered at her church and asked her priest, "Father, I've already given of myself, would you please give me enough food to eat for me and my kids?" Another woman talked about how awful it was when she first moved here. "It was awful to have to be asking my sister-in-law for milk and food all the time. She was the one who helped us more but she also have two little girls of her own to feed. I would worry most about the milk, you know, because I had a 1-year-old daughter and I never had enough milk to give her." We focus on trying to make ends meet. These are the stories of the people that we work with, that we represent. What, I don't want to put on the spot but one of the biggest challenges is that if we're providing services for these families and these communities, we have to do it in a way that we are humbled by and hopefully, de-professionalized because if we're providing services to low income communities, we have to do it without shaming them and we have witnessed opportunities, very sad experiences of people being turned away at food banks, saying, "You don't qualify." And the woman saying, "I was called to get in line and now you're turning me away." And that is not something that I'm here to prepare us to continue to do anymore. There's also a mismatch between resources that are available in the Colonias of Doña Ana County, New Mexico. We have community action. We have nonprofit organizations offering food but the people who need it do not have the transportation to join the lines and collect their food baskets. It is often times people say, "I need food but I don't have transportation." So we have Ms. Dominguez, who says, "Look, we qualify for these cans and for these cereals but I have diabetes and I can't eat it. I cannot eat the food they're offering me. If I eat what they give me, I'll get even more sick." And they don't understand that. The doctor wants me to walk. The doctor does not understand what it is to live in a Colonia. They don't understand this. So we speak on behalf of many. Unfortunately, they can't be here. Many times it's their social stigma, their unauthorized status, the single motherhood, they have a gendered burden to deal with food insecurity, is to feel what it is to be a mother and not know what to feed your children and this is a gendered burden that we are here to provide testimony on. Thank you.

**Commissioner: Thank you, Dr. Núñez, that was fantastic.**

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: Could you, before you get up, could you give us one specific recommendation to be able to make to Congress that would help address the issue that you brought to hand?**

Participant #2: Yes, I've worked with a lot of farm workers in the Colonias of Doña Ana County, that was my dissertation work. I would offer an opportunity for Meals on Wheels, any type of opportunity for us to identify the neediest in the community, working with





promotoras. A British sociologist talked about horizontal and vertical integration of Colonias. Horizontal, that means the neighbors need to know their neighbors. Vertical integration is we need to know the agencies and the institutions that have the resources to provide resources. Our promotoras are a key to connecting. They help identify who our elders are. There was a man called Mr. Miguelito [phonetic]. I was overwhelmed because he lived by himself since he was a widower. I never knew where he would procure his next meal. So I had to contact promotoras and I said, "Would you, please, come by his house and see that he's eating? Can someone, please, swing by his home?" So I know a long time ago, I'm a child of farm workers from California. I knew of a program called Meals on Wheels and if we know people are hungry and we know that there are agencies and services available to provide to people, then I think our job is to connect them.

**Commissioner: Does anybody else have any questions?**

**Commissioner: I do.**

**Commissioner: There's been a lot of talk, thank you so much, okay, and I hope you've left your contact information because, clearly, you're a wealth of information and you, too. We've had a lot of discussion on our Commission about fathers, where are the fathers, where are the fathers? You, yourself, brought up that single mothers are under tremendous stress. What would be your solution to that, to say to men, you won't feed your child because you've left?**

Participant #2: I think, you know, when you, I've looked at New Mexico, 1 out of 4 children [is] living in poverty. So to punish our children because the fathers are not there, I think, is not the way to go. I think it definitely, if we have fathers, the role often times of the provider but the fact is often times the burden of care and the burden of nutrition tends to be a gendered burden and falls on the shoulders of women. So I've documented women selling food out of their homes, going door-to-door and saying, "Do you have anything left over?" It's because the companies don't go there and we have food deserts in Colonias, the women have become very resourceful. Men, also, are partners when there are two-parent households but often times the situations of poverty we're not seeing a lot of men be present.

**Commissioner: Where are the men? Are they, and where I come from they're dead or in jail a lot of the time.**

Participant #2: So here we have men who never married with the women who have children, men who are busy working and therefore the responsibility of building community and dealing with community needs is the women's super-madre role, right, "I am the mother and therefore I take care of my family and take care of my community," and my question is, yes, where are the men? The men don't consider community work often



times as their purview. They think, “I’m busy making money and I’ll take care of my family when I can.” We’ve also documented the braceros, men who came to work here and they leant their arms from the ‘40s to ‘60s, when they tried going home, their wives and children no longer wanted them because they had been absent fathers, right. So we have, I’ve documented four men living alone feeding each other because they had no families to go home to, right. So we cannot speak only of women. We speak of women and children, of the elderly, people who can’t drive, people who are disabled and cannot get access to clean water. That is a huge issue in our communities.

**Commissioner: Thank you very much for your testimony. I have a question for, is your name Mariana?**

Corina: Corina [phonetic].

**Commissioner: What is it?**

Participant #2: Corina.

**Commissioner: Corina?**

Corina: Yes.

**Commissioner: Corina, would you be willing to tell us some of your biggest concerns? What would you like to tell us? Anything?**

Corina: I think would be—

**Commissioner: Into the microphone a little closer, thank you.**

Corina: I think it would be the resources in Colonias. Most of my research was, well, testimonies that I gathered was in Colonias and it was transportation, mainly and the shaming.

**Commissioner: The shame?**

Corina: When they were trying to go to food pantries and the woman or the community was shamed and couldn’t have access to the meal and also the type of food that is provided, that it’s not healthy. I, myself, saw the type of food that they were giving, most of the food was frozen and it wasn’t as healthy. It was like food, what are they called?

Participant #2: Pizza pockets.





Corina: Yes, pockets and things that you can't really, that they're not considered healthy.

Participant #2: We're also finding that mixed status families—

**Commissioner: Into the microphone, please.**

Participant #2: — that mixed status families, because if someone in their family is fixing their immigration status, although they might have immigrant children or U.S.-born children, if they have someone in their family who's fixing their status, the family is less likely to seek care or any type of intervention and we're punishing our children when a family can actually qualify for care. There's the fear that this is going to come back and hurt them in the future when they try to seek residency or citizenship status. So mixed status families and we know we have them.

**Commissioner: Right.**

Participant #2: And it's affecting our kids who can qualify for aid.

**Commissioner: Thank you both.**

**Commissioner: Thank you very much.**

**Commissioner: That was fantastic and I want to let you know that you can also submit this research report that you've put together on the Hunger Commission website, so that we can look at the whole thing in context. Thank you very much. [applause] I'd like to call up Kyle Stephan.**

**Commissioner: Wait, no, no, no. No? Okay, we're all right. Okay.**



PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #3

**Commissioner: Thank you, Kyle. Please introduce yourself and go ahead.**

Participant #3: Sure, well, if you can hear me, my name is Kyle Stephan. I am, I've been in El Paso for about a year and I'm actually a Border Servant Corps volunteer. So this is basically, kind of like a Peace Corps or Ameri-Corps volunteer here on the border. I've been here for about a year and I work at the Kelly Memorial Food Pantry, which is the largest food pantry here in El Paso. I'm the Operations Manager, kind of like a volunteer but I get a paid stipend just to live here. So I wanted to speak today to address kind of how, like the doctor was saying, our funds are being used to address hunger here in El Paso. So I've seen food insecurity all year firsthand. We're on the frontlines as a food pantry. Kelly started in 1999. We serve around 4,500 clients per month and at times served 5,500. We partner with the food bank, El Pasoans Fighting Hunger and last year they provided 1.1 million pounds of food to us in 2014. We also have a partnership with a local farm. It's called Jardin De Milagros. These two farmers graciously give us over 100,000 pounds of donated vegetables last year and they continue to this year. I'm here to urge you that although these are impressive quantifiable statistics, this is not enough to eliminate hunger. While Kelly has graciously served USDA food from the food bank, the fact that we continue to exist since 1999 is evidence enough that quantity itself is not the solution. So I'm going to, I'll give you three main points that are true development initiatives, I think, this Commission can suggest that can help here in El Paso. And it kind of consolidates some of the things that people have said. El Paso needs access to food. So our clients have stressed to us that there are just not as many places to actually access food. As numerous research reports, as the doctor has said, and research indicates, race, ethnicity, transit, what have you, income, those are all barriers to access. The most expensive and most accessible supermarkets are far away from the poorest income, poorest neighborhoods here in El Paso. So access, number one, number two, prices. We saw after the crisis, as you must know, 1 billion hungry people in the world, so hunger is not something that's just going to go away but we need to get a hold on our prices. We need to keep our emergency assistance programs where they are but also work with our local farmers, as we are here in El Paso at Kelly, to really work at capacity building and lower production prices. And finally, I would address the quality of food. As many have stated, food here in El Paso needs to be nutritious. We've learned through the Paso Nuerte Health Foundation of the negative effects of food insecurity and diabetes and based on Kelly's statistics, we impact 12,000 people and one-third of those are children. So there is a great need to provide nutritious food to people here in this region. So those one, two, three points need to be added to this region. Thank you.

**Commissioner: Excellent.**

**Commissioner: Thank you.**



**Commissioner: Thank you, Kyle. Are there any questions for Kyle?**

**Commissioner: No questions.**

**Commissioner: Thank you, Kyle. It is great to see so many young adults here today. We've had a whole group of UTEP students and great to see young adults committing their lives to working in Colonias, so thank you. The next name I'm going to call is Christopher Rodriguez. Is Christopher here yet? Okay, Ruben Sanchez? As Ruben comes, I know there are some new faces in the crowd and so I want to just let you know, so the National Commission on Hunger was, it's a ten-member commission. It's bipartisan. We were appointed by Congress, essentially, to look at the scope of food insecurity in the United States and to make recommendations to Congress on how we can ultimately reduce food insecurity or end hunger and then we'll also make those recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture. So as you're thinking about your thoughts, you're bringing some valuable context but if you can think maybe specifically about one, two, or three ways that we can improve federal policy, that is specifically our task. So if you'll think about that as you're coming. Thank you. All right, Ruben?**



#### PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #4

Participant #4: My name is Ruben Sanchez. I'm the Regional Director for the Texas Hunger Initiative, lifelong resident of El Paso, Texas. I've been in nonprofits here in our region for the last 15 years and I'd like to thank the Commission for the time that we spent together in the last week. We've had the privilege of being able to live the lives of these people and it is a great honor to be able to have shown you around and do that. A better life is what resonates with me, what we've heard and what you've heard in the last week. The individuals that we serve in the Southwest, they say that statement when you ask them, "What do you think about hunger," and they think, "A better life." Thinking about the different nonprofits that I've worked for, when I worked in Public Housing, the one question that was always answered when I'd ask, "What is it that you need," they'd say, "A better life," even though the refrigerator was empty, the children were suffering from abuse or neglect, it was always, "A better life." Hunger, we asked every day that we've had visits, when we asked a person about hunger, it was a better life, a better home, a better environment for my kids. Hunger was the principal issue but it related to all those things. People on SNAP when I've done SNAP outreach and SNAP work, when we asked them what is it they lack, they say, "A better life." Focusing on the individual programs that only treat the particular issues and not the poverty is the central issue that we're dealing with. We're focused on SNAP. We're focused on feeding programs in the summertime. We're focused on the different programs but we're not focusing on the central issue. We're not focusing on the individual. And when we come face-to-face with that individual, we realize that there is a necessity to help build a system that will get that individual out of poverty, which is the real issue here. And part of that cycle of getting a person out of poverty is encouraging the nontraditional partnerships that should exist in the community. I heard earlier the summer EBT Program mentions the food bank was approached at the time that I was the Executive Director of the food bank, to manage that program and it was a very nontraditional program, and we're allowed to partner with the Texas Department of Agriculture and Health and Human Services and make a viable change and probably one of the most successful programs in the nation because of the fact that it was not a traditional partnership because in other communities the child's benefit was sent home in a backpack and probably never used, as opposed to us approaching the family and engaging the family and making sure there was a personal relationship for a benefit to be used. But other such nontraditional partnerships exist in our community. When I think of the Anthony Police Department, that there's a proactive police department by providing a food pantry for the individuals that live in the community. Rather than policing the community by force and a strong presence, they're showing that they care about the community and trying to feed the community and addressing the central issues of hunger in that community that lead to other crimes and issues that exist. And then I heard the professor at UTEP speak to us earlier today and she mentioned that the pantry that had been trying to be formed since I was Executive Director at that food bank is finally coming to fruition. It takes time. It takes time. And we heard Salvador Balcorta say that it's taken more than 40 years and we hope



that it won't take more than that. Other nontraditional partnerships are for-profit outreach programs partnering with nonprofits and the federal government. Banks and financial institutions wish to engage in the issues that exist by providing financial education and other aspects to these people's lives but we're not engaging them. So if I were to say that there's a recommendation that needs to be made to our congressional leadership, it is a famous quote that those of us of faith remember, "An essential is unity, in nonessential is [sic] liberty and in all things, charity." People come to our nation, come to our country to better their lives and then in some cases people that have lived here all their lives need the support and the help. That's the premise that our nation was founded on, not party lines. In closing, I spent a few days in Terlingua doing outreach work with Texas Hunger Initiative and I talked to the leadership in the community and they, I asked them about the school district and the individuals that worked in the school district and the meals that the kids eat and he said, "What meals?" The enrollment in the school has gone down to the point where it's not profitable for the school district and the school to serve meals to the children. That's alarming because now the people that were preparing the meals for the kids no longer have a job and we continue to create a cycle. We have to do something. We have to take a step forward in the right direction and we have to hold the people that are suffering in our nation essential. All the other things are just matters of dispute. Thank you.

**Commissioner: Thank you, Ruben.**

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: Does anybody have any questions?**

**Commissioner: No questions.**

**Commissioner: We're especially grateful for your willingness to show us the community over the past week and we know that you've spent a considerable amount of your time doing so. We're grateful to that. Yes?**

**Commissioner: I do have a question.**

Participant #4: Yes, ma'am.

**Commissioner: I'm very taken with your, the saying of, "A better life," when you talk about hunger, people want a better life.**

Participant #4: Yes, ma'am.

**Commissioner: Better than what?**



Participant #4: Better than what they have at the present time, better than what they knew in the past. When I think of my life, I think of my past. I grew up with teenage parents. I was born into a pregnancy. My brother could testify. Earlier, it's five years my younger [brother] and it's Friday night and when I think of my mom, Friday night was the night to go out to eat, that's what she enjoyed. And Friday night out to eat for us was McDonald's. It's not healthy. It doesn't cost a lot. When she was eating, she had a smile on her face. My brother and I probably didn't eat everything that we had but if you looked at that family of four that was sitting at the table, my dad never ate. He never ate because he only had enough to buy that meal for my brother, myself, and my mother. He would either wait and eat what my brother and I would leave behind or get home and eat a bologna sandwich. So better than what we knew in the past and better than what's present. We have to change things, unfair wages, unfair work environments. We have to address the issue holistically from a 30,000-foot elevation and then down one-on-one and it's going to take people that are willing to do the work.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: Thank you, Ruben. We appreciate it. [applause]**

**Commissioner: Can you also say that if you speak only Spanish, you are welcome to come forward?**

**Commissioner: Sure.**

**Commissioner: Because we have a translator.**



PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #5

**Commissioner: Dr. Chilton pointed out that if you only speak Spanish, we do have a translator available and so you are welcome to come and provide testimony. What I'm doing is I'm going through the list of names of people that have signed up to provide public testimony. After we've concluded with that list, if there are additional people here that would also like to share something with the Commission then we'll make time available to do so. Okay, next up I have Janie Sinclair.**

Participant #5: Good afternoon.

**Commissioner: Hi.**

Participant #5: I am Janie Sinclair, Executive Director of El Pasoans Fighting Hunger Food Bank. That's hard to follow.

**Commissioner: Ruben's a preacher, too, so I get it. I get it. I get it, yeah.**

Participant #5: I know he is. [laughter] Yeah, according to the Hunger in America studies, thanks, brother. [Laughter] Thank you. According, I don't know what's come over me. I'll get through this.

**Commissioner: All right.**

Participant #5: According to the Hunger in America Study, 131,000 people in El Paso are food insecure or 1 in 6 El Pasoans, 1 in 3 children are food insecure. El Pasoans Fighting Hunger distributed 9.4 million pounds of food in 2014 or 7,833,000 meals through the 110 food banks, food pantries in El Paso, Hudspeth, and Culberson Counties. During, thank you very much, in case anybody wonders, you can't cry and swallow at the same time. It works like a champ. I've known Ruben for a while and that was touching. During the first quarter of 2015 the food bank was distributing 58 meals per person in need. According to the Hunger in America comprehensive study done by Feeding America and El Pasoans Fighting Hunger in 2014, we and our partner agencies served 99,400 non-repeat clients at those food pantries or 1 in 8 in El Pasoans. Of the 99,400, 57% of the households had children, 27% are children, 21% are seniors, and 74% of adult clients work at least half-time. El Pasoans Fighting Hunger clients make hard choices. Seventy percent of these households report purchasing inexpensive, unhealthy food because they could not afford healthier options; 67% of these households report having to choose between paying for food and paying for medicine or medical care; 39% of the households include a member with diabetes. According to a University of California San Francisco study, hospital admission rates for uncontrolled diabetes spike in the last week of the month because people have run out of the healthy food to control their disease. Sixty-two percent of these households





have a member with high blood pressure, 34% without health insurance, 58% receive SNAP. Very briefly, I'll tell you about three clients. We are story-banking information from the clients who visit our food pantries. Claudia and her husband have type 2 diabetes. Her household is composed of three adults. Her son goes to college right now and he works to pay his bills but the parents help. According to Claudia, having SNAP is not enough. We are paying a house, car, and insurance. I don't receive any check, only my husband is receiving his retirement check. What would happen to you if your family, if this food assistance were not available? We would eat less. We wouldn't have enough rice and beans to eat. Folks diagnosed with cancer. Some folks who have \$80.00 a month in SNAP, 75-year-old man with knee surgery receives \$16.00 in SNAP. I will tell you briefly about a lady who approached me at one of our mobile food pantries, which is where the food bank takes bags of nutritious food directly into the Colonias, to the people who can't get to them. The lady thanked me personally because she said, "Thanks to that food, she could buy her heart medication." And finally, a tragic story I heard about three weeks ago that took my breath. A lady who receives her medication through Medicare, sells it on the black market to buy food.

**Commissioner: Thank you, Ms. Sinclair.**

Participant #5: So what can you do to help? Please, support the agriculture bills. Kelly Memorial is supported by a private farm who planted that farm solely for the support of Kelly Memorial, the wonderful people. I called a county extension agent in El Paso and said, "Please, give me the name of all of the farmers who produce an edible crop." One farmer grows onions. Everybody else has gone to cotton and pecans. So thank you.

**Commissioner: Thank you. Are you available for questions if anybody has any?**

Participant #5: Yes, sir.

**Commissioner: So I just want to clarify, so y'all served 1 in 8—**

Participant #5: Yes.

**Commissioner: —of everybody in El Paso?**

Participant #5: Yes, sir, it's according to the Feeding America study. I could provide that to you, if you'd like it.

**Commissioner: That'd be great, thank you.**

Participant #5: Okay.



**Commissioner: Well, thank you for your work.**

Participant #5: Thank you for—

**Commissioner: I am sorry that that is the case. We got a long way to go but thank you for your work and for spending time with us this afternoon.**

Participant #5: Thank you for what you're doing.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

Participant #5: Appreciate it. [applause]



PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #6

**Commissioner: Carlos Rivera? Thank you for joining us, Mr. Rivera.**

Participant #6: Well, thank you for coming to El Paso. It's a great place to be but as you have received testimony today, we still face a lot of challenges as far as hunger goes. My name's Carlos Rivera. I'm the past National Vice Commander for the America GI Forum, which is the only national congressionally chartered veterans, Hispanic veterans organization in this country. And currently, I'm the President of a group that we just started in January of this year, called Legacy of Valor. I'm a veteran, U.S. Air Force, 1971 to 1975. I am a social worker by training, worked with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for 20 years with Environmental Protection Agency and with the International Boundary Water Commission. I retired 10 years ago and when I retired, I thought I was taking time off but veterans kept calling me, saying, "Carlos, we need help. We need help with healthcare. We need help with benefits. We need help with jobs. We need help with housing and we need help with food." I went on a cross-country journey last year, started here, went to California, and drove cross country. It took me 9 months to finish my journey, meeting with veterans all along the way. It was a fact finding mission to find out for myself if things had changed. They had not. The priorities are still the same. We still have problems with healthcare, benefits, jobs, housing, hunger, and starting businesses for those that are interested. I'll also speak about hunger and homelessness from personal experience. As a child, I was basically homeless for about 6 years, not just me but I have five brothers and sisters. So I know what the feeling of homelessness is. I know what being hungry is, and just to touch on one of the questions you asked Ruben earlier. I think you asked him, "What's a better life?" And I can tell from personal experience, I can tell you what a better life was for us. We were lucky that a social worker intervened on our behalf and I and three of my younger brothers and sisters met up at Lee Moor Children's Home. It's a great home here in El Paso and that's where I found out what a better life was. We didn't have to worry about shelter. We didn't have to worry about where the next meal would come from, and we didn't have to worry about where our clothing came from and those were three of the basics that we needed going to school and growing up. So that's part of the answer as to what a better life is for a young person growing up homeless and hungry but I'm here to talk about veterans because that's one population that I don't see on the agenda. I don't believe anybody has touched on that today and the veterans have to be heard as well. El Paso estimates that's there 200 to 300 homeless veterans on any given day here in El Paso but those are not the only ones that we need to worry about when it comes to hunger. There's veterans that are living alone. They're proud and not willing to step out and ask for help. I run into those veterans because I still get calls. I mention that I retired 10 years ago and the reason that I stay active with veteran services organizations is because the needs are still there. The reason we started up Legacy of Valor was to identify the gaps in services between what the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs offers, what the Texas Veterans Commission offers, and what the communities offer and there's a significant gap. I said I



estimate at the most the VA system touches about 20% of the veteran population. For El Paso that means maybe about 10,000 to 20,000 but there's at least I said 40,000 to 60,000 that are not reached. On a national level we have about 25 million veterans and if you use that 20%, I said there's maybe 10 million vets that are being reached and at least 15 million out there, 15 million that are left unserved. So I'm just here to bring that, draw your attention to the fact that veterans need help, too. Veterans are homeless and veterans are hungry and I ask that you consider our veteran population in your work, and the only thing I have to say is that no veteran should go hungry after serving honorably on behalf of this country. No veteran should be left behind and that's what I ask of you is to make sure that the veteran population is included in this discussion about hunger in America. We're hungry, too. Thank you.

**Commissioner: Mr. Rivera, are you available for questions?**

**Commissioner: Do you know if the Veterans Administration or anyone has ever done a survey documenting the rates of hunger among the 25 million veterans that you just mentioned?**

Participant #6: Well, the VA conducts surveys, I believe, every 10 years but one of the things that I am concerned about, the answer to your question is there are surveys done.

**Commissioner: That document—**

Participant #6: The problem that I see is that most of the work is done on the Internet. Okay, applications for benefits are on the Internet. Surveys are done on the Internet and when you're dealing with a lot of veterans, especially the Vietnam, Korea, and World War II generations, we're not as computer-literate and Internet savvy as the young vets that are currently coming up from Iraq and Afghanistan. That's one plus that the Iraq and Afghanistan vets have. They are used to working with the Internet. They can go online and do all the research that they need to address these concerns but again, to your question, there are surveys done. Most of the work is on the Internet and the majority of Vietnam, Korea, World War II vets are not computer literate. I said I'd try to push that on them and they tell me, "Carlos, hey, man, we're old. This is too late. I mean, we don't do that stuff," but the answer is yes but it's very inefficient.

**Commissioner: Thank you very much for your testimony. I wanted to let you know that the Commission is considering issues among veterans and also, active duty military. So we did hear testimony when we were in Oakland, California on issues about food insecurity and homelessness among vets and also among active duty military and we are currently seeking someone to provide testimony in Washington, DC from the Department of Defense or from some other type of agency that works with either veterans or active duty military, so we are considering it and we really**



**appreciate your testimony today. I was wondering if I could ask you a question about why, first of all, I want to thank you for your service to our country—**

Participant #6: Thank you.

**Commissioner: —during Vietnam. I know that’s very, very difficult. I wanted to know if you would be willing to share with us why you joined the military and how you have been able to provide for your family after coming out of the military.**

Participant #6: Well, I think the social worker that reached out her hand to us when we were children, she pretty much was my role model and I guess that’s why I ended up becoming a social worker because after leaving the children’s home, I said, I went to school for a year and then joined the military. And the reason that I joined the military is that I was still trying to find myself at that point and I completed four years in the Air Force, came out, got my bachelor’s degree in sociology, my masters in social work, worked. I actually worked with abused and neglected children for a while. I also worked with the elderly before working with veterans but I waited to become a parent ‘til I was 45, so by that time I was pretty well settled in. I had worked through my issues and one of the things I made a promise to him, it was that he was never, ever have to suffer from homelessness, never from worrying about where his next meal is coming from or his clothing was coming from. So that he could concentrate on the more important issues of school and he’s currently a junior at Michigan State studying Chinese and Asian studies because he knows where this economy in this world is going but no, I said, the social worker kind of was my role model. I followed that and it has worked for me and I continue to use that today to help our veterans and families.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: Thank you very much.**

**Commissioner: If you have one recommendation, so obviously, with the amount of people that have been serving in our Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the Middle East, we have just a whole host of veterans that are coming back with severe PTSD, that as you know, opens up a whole host of issues and then hunger often times is a symptom of those greater issues, what’s one thing that you would tell, that you could recommend for us to put in our recommendations to Congress to particularly deal with this issue?**

Participant #6: To address the issues of Post-Traumatic Stress—

**Commissioner: Well, or maybe—**



Participant #6: —traumatic brain injury—

**Commissioner: Yeah, and how it ultimately affects hunger but so that we can give Congress something concrete, so that they can, you know, be held accountable to make a difference for those who've been serving our country?**

Participant #6: What I would recommend is that we put together a team of veterans that covers all the generations from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Iraq, Afghanistan, have them come and speak to you directly and to Congress to address these particular issues because one of the things that I have found out over the years, particularly dealing with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, is that it's usually 10 to 20 years behind the times. By the time that the VA was in position to address the issues of World War II, the Korean War vets, and Vietnam vets were coming up. By the time the VA got used to or at least established itself to address the issues that the Vietnam veterans were bringing back, the war was over in 1975 and it wasn't until 1985 that the VA was prepared to address those issues. And once you start going into those then we're into Desert Storm and so before a war ends, we're already in a different war, so that the VA never gets around to fully satisfying the needs of certain veteran populations and I think it would be important to hear directly from the veterans as far as what their challenges are and I just say that with traumatic brain injury, Post Traumatic Stress, exposure to hazardous chemicals like Agent Orange, radiation, depleted uranium and other chemicals but also to address how that leads some vets to divorce, to homelessness, to hunger. I think they're all intertwined.

**Commissioner: Okay, thank you, that's very helpful. I thank you for your time.**

**Commissioner: Thank you very much.**

Participant #6: Thank you. [applause]



PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #7

**Commissioner: Next, Maria Elena Barrón [phonetic]. Thank you. Hello, Ms. Barrón, yes.**

**Commissioner: It won't explode. You can pull it forward. Own it, there you go.**

**Commissioner: That's right.**

Participant #7: Good evening, my name is Maria Elena Barrón. I am a partner of El Pasoans Fighting Hunger, check out our t-shirts [Laughter] and we've been working with El Pasoans Fighting Hunger and West Texas Food Bank for almost 15 years. So I've seen many families' troubles that they have and one of the biggest things that I seem to have to find, which is also part of the educational system is that we have many people who think they know what everybody needs but they never ask the people, "What do you need," and that's one of our biggest mistakes because we say, "Oh, well, we need to get them some training. Oh, well, we need to get them some resources," you know, but they don't ever really sit down and ask them, "How can I, how can we help you? What can I do to help you," which has been one of the things that our, we are a very small pantry. We don't do thousands like Kelly Memorial. We do 160 to 200 a month. We do across the city from one end to the other, south and north. We do elderly. We do single parents. We don't get a lot of homeless. We do get veterans, a lot of the veterans. I started out with one caseworker from the VA. We're up to nine caseworkers. We are agency-driven, that means the agencies send us people, the Food Stamps and all and send us the people they think are in need. So we don't get the people that make this their monthly routine. These are people that are, they're at the end of their rope. There is nothing left. There is nowhere to go. They really need to get through, so half the time they aren't thinking nutritious meals. They are thinking, "We are hungry and I don't care what you have, what can you help us with," and sitting there, trying to teach them to eat nutritionally [phonetic] when they don't have nothing to eat does not make sense. That's not the time to be teaching because they're in that need of food. So one of the things that I think is that we really need to look at is what is it they do need? I have a lot of problems with the SNAP Program, the way they treat the people. They come and tell you, you just have to ask their name and they tell you what's going on and I call them and tell them, "I have this patient, this client, why are you not helping them? What did they do? What's wrong?" And they, you know, they get a lot of run around. This is a group of people that have no gas money, no food money and they're told, "You need to come back in two weeks," and they come back and they bring, "You need to come back in another week." If you can do something about the SNAP Program for some of the, I don't know if it's across the states or it's just Texas but they are struggling. People that are on Food Stamps are on there because they are in need and then they're turned around and they cut their Food Stamps, which makes it even worse. I don't know how to solve the problem on the Food Stamp issue. We have lots of money going into that but I don't know how they, it's over,



how they run it and how they deal with it. Another thing that I see is the transportation. It is a big problem when they can't, you know, they're hungry but they have no way to get there and, "I have no gas, so how do I get food?" So we kind of, the little bit that we do, that we do is we go out to the, we go out in the neighborhoods and take the food out. One suggestion might be that if we approached, if we financially supported the food banks, some of these food banks that are doing tremendous jobs of bringing in, I mean, 9 million pounds of food, they're bringing it in but they're not the ones that are out delivering it. It's all those little pantries that they give the food to, to pass out, to get it out is to support these food banks financially, so they, in turn, can grant some of these pantries a funding source. You got to have a funding source in order to be able to run a pantry. You got to have refrigerators. You got to have space and so forth and that might be something that you all could look into is about helping some of these food banks that are really trying to help get us to help and so forth and that's why.

**Commissioner: Thank you. Do you have any questions?**

**Commissioner: No, I have none.**

**Commissioner: I will ask, Ms. Barrón, am I saying it right?**

Participant #7: Yes, sir.

**Commissioner: Ruben Sanchez, who I'm assuming you all probably know each other, if you all can follow up with each other and we talked a little bit about the Community Partner Program, could be a more inviting opportunity for your, for those that you're working with to access a program like SNAP without any kind of issue, so yeah.**

Participant #7: Right.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: Thank you very much.**

**Commissioner: Yeah, yes, sure, yeah, both of you. Yeah, I just, I want to remind everybody quickly, if anybody does need a translator, we do have them on-hand and so feel free to testify, whether you're testifying in English or Spanish. We also have water, coffee, and tea in the back of the room, so thanks to La Fe. They have just put out a fresh pot of coffee and some waters for us, so please, help yourself. I know I'm on my twelfth cup today, so [Laughter] I'm certainly—**



PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #8

Participant #8: Thank you for allowing me to speak. My name is Ana Solis. I am the person in charge of receiving and distributing food, excuse me, at Open Arms Community. One of the eldest operating food pantries in El Paso, operating since 1974. We are located at 8210 North Luke Drive in the El Paso Mission Valley.

**Commissioner: I'm sorry to interrupt you but could you move the microphone a little bit closer to you or lean in a little bit. Thank you very much. Sorry.**

Participant #8: We are located at 8210 North Luke Drive in the El Paso Mission Valley, one of the poorest areas in the city, maybe in the county and state, as well. At the outset, let me say there's a great deal for federal funding to bolster the El Paso Fighting Hunger Program. Doing this and Open Arms and other partners, food pantries, can better provide and assist the many needy people and families in our community who are referred to us through school districts, churches, the Catholic diocese, the VA, just to name a few. El Paso is a border city with a steady influx of immigrants. In addition to this, we have many refugees. We have served refugees from many countries but the majorities are individuals and families escaping the violence across the border due to drug wars and criminal activities, which escalated in recent years. Some, including children, have witnessed the cold-blooded murder of fathers, husbands, and brothers. Upon threat of death of selves because of what they have seen, they have been admitted to our country with the legal refugee status but do not have the permission to work. They are referred to us for assistance. Demand is so great we have a waiting list. Federal assistance can help us meet the needs of these applicants. Many people in El Paso live before the, live below the national poverty level. They depend on food pantries, such as ours, to provide food for their tables. Ideally, we want to always provide staples such as beans, rice, milk, cereal, along with canned and frozen foods, also, fresh fruit and vegetables, which are in season. However, sometimes the budget of El Pasoans Fighting Hunger cannot regularly provide essential basics like the beans, rice, cereal, and milk. Federal assistance is needed. El Paso has a high rate of alcoholism contributing to dysfunctional families and many single parent homes. Many elderly who do not qualify for state or federal assistance for various reasons are now the head of households taking in destitute children and grandchildren. We try to meet their needs. Federal funding for El Paso Fighting Hunger would enable us to do more of this and all for our needy families. Federal funding for the El Paso Fighting Hunger Program will enable partnering agencies, just as Open Arms Community, to better assist the needy citizens of El Paso County. Thank you for your attention and consideration for this help.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: Thank you.**



**Commissioner: Questions?**

**Commissioner: I'm sorry to have missed part of your testimony.**

Participant #8: I'm sorry.

**Commissioner: What countries do your pru-calls, the people who come in and are not deported but can't work come from?**

Williams: Mostly, the majority come, excuse me, my [name is] Gloria Williams and I'm the Administrator for Open Arms Community, most of the referrals that we're getting are through the DMRS, which is called the Diocesan and Migrant Refugee Services. These are families coming from Mexico. Also we have families coming from Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan that we service through the Council of Bishops that are helping these families escape the war over there that are victims of war through violence, I mean, violence through war from those countries we also help and assist those families.

**Commissioner: Wow, thank you.**

**Commissioner: Thank you both for your time, we appreciate what you're doing.**

**Commissioner: Thank you very much. [applause]**

**Commissioner: I'm going to ask, so we have one more person on my list, which is Esther Zapata. Esther, if you'll go ahead and come on up. As she's doing that, Christine, if you'll get a signup sheet, if you would raise your hand if you're interested in providing testimony after Esther and then, okay, and that way we can make sure that we're adding to it. Christine, if you'll bring that to me when—**

**Commissioner: Some people refuse to walk up [inaudible].**



## PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #9

Participant #9: Hi.

**Commissioner: Hi.**

Participant #9: It's really weird to be talking in front of a microphone. We've been told that we have microphones in my family in our throats. [Laughter] Good evening and thank you for coming here. I am not here to speak on behalf of the Hispanic community, although I am Hispanic and I've been told never to begin a presentation with a negative note but there's no way to sugarcoat hunger and food insecurity and I am here to share my testimony and to give the testimony of the six to ten students that I know of at UTEP who use the student food pantry there, the unofficial food pantry at UTEP, on a weekly basis. I am also here to speak on behalf of the 64 students that are part of the foster/homelessness, homeless and adopted resource center at UTEP, also, which is for students that had aged out of the foster care system and I am also here to represent the 200 students that are living in temporary shelters or in the homeless shelters here in El Paso and I am also here to speak on behalf of the 4,000, estimated 4,000 students who live on \$12,000 or less a year. The very interesting part of this is that they do not know I am here and the reason is because for years they have not had a voice. Food insecurity is very associated with a stigma, with the shame, and for over 10 years a closet-sized food pantry at UTEP was run under the radar, suggesting of its inadequate existence. After all, you know, college students, we are the privileged elite in our country and we are the hungry privileged. I am here to tell those students that hunger is nothing to be ashamed of, that [as] of June 23 at 3:00 PM, UTEP has established an official food pantry for students, faculty, and staff because believe it or not, staff also came to us asking for help. My testimony this evening is not so much about me or about the UTEP food pantry but rather a plea to those suffering from hunger to not be afraid to voice their concerns and more importantly, to do something about it. We have had a great victory at UTEP by creating this official food pantry but there is much more that needs to be done. We need to educate. We need to educate that hunger is not a choice and we need to inform ourselves and others of where to seek help. We also need to share, we need to share what we have and what we don't have, share the stories of hunger and share that extra can of beans and we also need to stop the stigma. We need to voice, stop the shaming of the hungry, sorry, and we need to stop being ashamed of being hungry and there is something to be done everywhere. According to Feed America, 1 of 6 people in the United States suffer from food insecurity, so these people are not only on our campus, they're also in our homes, they're in our neighborhood. When we began our proposal for a student food pantry at UTEP, we had to do some research, which was very hard to do because very little has been done here in the United States regarding hunger on campus. When we looked at the numbers, like I said, it was very hard to do and we did find one and that was from OSU in 2004, '14, they did a survey that found that 59% of students had at one point or another gone through hunger or food insecurity. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* also reported



that 39% of students had skipped meals or gone hungry for lack of money. When we tried to do this survey for UTEP, we also contacted the Health and Human Services Commission and they sent us a bill for \$142.00 to find out how many students were currently using SNAP. So my recommendation for you is this, this is obviously not a Hispanic issue, it is a student issue. It is affecting our higher education and how can we be the best and provide the best education in the world if most students are going hungry? Let's just do something.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: That was, I appreciate you bringing that issue to light. Does anybody have any questions? I know three of us work with college students and so that's something of particular interest. One thing I do want to turn you to is, so I work at Baylor University and our students started a program called Campus Kitchen. It's out of the DC kitchen model. If you want to connect, if Charis, if you'll wave your hand, if you want to connect with Charis, our students reclaim all of the food from our, from all of the cafeterias from every meal, every day and make that available in shelters, in homeless shelters, in places around the community. I know that there are a number of cafeterias on campus at UTEP. I've eaten in some of them and so I would encourage you to look up that program. It's just we throw away 100 billion pounds of edible food every year as a nation and we're doing that a lot on college campuses and school districts and we don't have to. You can get food handling licenses. You can transport the food. It's a fantastic way to ensure better utilization of food and so I would encourage you to check that out. Mariana?**

**Commissioner: Thank you very much for your testimony. First of all, a very simple question, what does UTEP stand for?**

Participant #9: University of Texas at El Paso.

**Commissioner: University of Texas El Paso.**

Participant #9: At El Paso.

**Commissioner: So this is the state university system?**

Participant #9: Yes.

**Commissioner: Okay, thank you.**



Participant #9: Yes, the lines that we have to go, the steps that we have to go [through] in order to officiate a food pantry has been extremely difficult. About five students delayed graduation for over a year in order to make this thing happen and we have considered asking Sodexo, which is the company that does the cafeterias at UTEP, to also help facilitate the issue by not throwing away so much food or lowering their prices, at least.

**Commissioner: I wanted to know if you were willing to answer the question, if you could describe what this stigma and shame is? It's easy to say, "Shame and stigma," but what is underneath that? Why is there stigma and shame? Describe it, please.**

Participant #9: It's very difficult because like I said, we are the privileged elite and we are going to college, right? So we should be able to afford food and yes, we can afford the McDonald's but that gives us cholesterol or diabetes and we can afford food that is very primitive and very yes, you can survive on rice and beans but when so much food is being thrown away on our campus, is that fair? You know, can we really get enough? When we look at our students, you know, when, in classroom settings, for example, when you meet in a group and everybody goes like, "Oh, let's go to Village Inn," not being able to afford food or to even afford a cup of coffee is shameful, you know. You know, yes, we could use our federal grant money but usually, that money, we like to spend on rent because shelter is very important, too and I do not like bugs, so I'm not going to sleep under the bridge [laughter] but there is a stigma associated with being hungry. How many of you can say that you've been hungry today even and not feel like, "Oh, well, why didn't you go get food?" Well, some of us don't have that option of, "Let's go get some food." Some of us are at UTEP from 9:00 in the morning 'til 10:00 PM at night and the UTEP cafeteria offers food, \$4.00 for a can of yogurt or, you know, \$3.00 for a grilled cheese, I believe, or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Those are \$3.00 that we need to buy blue books, scan-trons, pens, paper, notebooks, my backpack, for example. So that's the stigma that's associated with it, that, "You're hungry because you choose to be hungry because you're too lazy to work. You're too lazy to go to Sprouts and get food or you're too lazy to go to Wal-Mart to get food," and that's not the reality. The reality is that we can barely afford the \$1.00 to get on a bus.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**



PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #10

**Commissioner: Well, thank you. I appreciate your time. [applause] All right, Gloria Williams?**

Participant #10: Good afternoon and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address you again with just a couple of other insights.

**Commissioner: Sure.**

Participant #10: Being hungry is very close to my heart since I had a mother that during the depression era at the age of 7 was in an institution for, with tuberculosis from hunger. I grew up with her always focusing on conserving food. My mother strived, she came from a very, very impoverished background, raised here in [inaudible] Navarro, graduated at the top of her class at Boyd High School and became a registered nurse by profession. My father was a Second World War veteran, retired from Phelps Copper Refinery, here in El Paso but my father would always be out on strike. At that time, they did have a union, so my mother would have to work sometimes two shifts in order to provide the income for our home. So I was the eldest of my siblings, four other siblings and at that time, there wasn't a SNAP Program. There was nothing available and my father could not go to the picket line to get a bag of potatoes or a bag of beans to bring home. We, I grew up hungry. So being the Administrator for Open Arms Community and our food pantry is very close to my heart of helping people who have hunger issues. We're one of the food pantries that deliver food to people that are undergoing chemo treatment, who are elderly, who have no one in, no family, no one available to take them food. They depend on our volunteers to deliver that food to them so that they can eat, okay. They're on \$20.00 maybe of SNAP provisions per month. They're on heavy medication and they're not, and I'm not only talking about people that are undergoing treatment but also that are going through dialysis treatments, and this is something that really affects the community here in El Paso, a lot of our seniors and a lot of people that are going through these issues. Today was our food bank distribution day. We provided services for about 250 families. We have two sessions, one at 10:00 in the morning and the other at 1:00 in the afternoon. Today we serviced two families that came to us. One of them, and I thank Mr. Rivera for speaking up because one of them is a young man who just got back from the Middle East serving 5 years tour, young man, disabled veteran, who has a Purple Heart, who was denied SNAP benefits and did not have any food for his family and he came to us and he felt ashamed that he had to come begging, when he, himself, is a veteran who gave out there, I mean, Purple Heart recipient, just goes to show what kind of valor this young man had. Okay, the other family is a young mother, about 29 years old, with five children who just had a double mastectomy, okay. And she is very sick, undergoing chemo. They live out in the outskirts of El Paso. Her brother has lost his job. To help her take care of her children and her, and he had, himself, has a young son, his life, his wife left him because he preferred to help his sister than to





even think of himself because his sister was nearing death. And they came to get emergency food from us for those children. So I beg you, please, please, make Congress aware of the necessities of these people, also, who do not have a voice. Those people that are ill, that are elderly, and that they have no family available to care to them, they also need to eat. Thank you very much for your time.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

**Commissioner: Thank you. [applause] Ma'am? Ms. Williams, we have one question for you. Sorry.**

**Commissioner: Thank you, I don't know what the circumstances were but do you know why the young, disabled veteran you mentioned was denied SNAP or what reason he was given?**

Participant #10: Sir, he has been going from facility to facility, you know, he's undergoing treatment, medical treatment, PTSD, he was working at the William Beaumont Hospital. There was a shooting here a couple months, I think a month ago or something like that. There was an incident there. There was a shooting at the William Beaumont Hospital. He was working there. When this shooting occurred, his PTSD triggered, okay, and he lost his job because of that, because he had this incident just triggered his PTSD and so they said, "Oh, no, we can't have you here," and so he was let go and he's been going from agency to agency asking for help assistance and has been denied and he was crying, sir. He was crying, literally crying and it's like I'm looking at my son and, you know, my father being a Second World War veteran, my brother, Vietnam veteran, as a matter of fact, I know because I helped my brother for 10 years. My brother is diagnosed with Agent Orange contamination, thank God he doesn't live in El Paso. He lives in Tennessee, has the best of facilities available to him, Johnson City, and also the Alvin G. York facility near Nashville and thank God he's getting his help there but I struggled 10 years to get my brother to get his disability through the VA. So Mr. Everett, I thank and commend him for his valor in speaking up for the veterans. By the way, we are also, we also collaborated with the Texas Initiative Program here in El Paso to assist all the homeless veterans and veterans that need food, not only food, clothing, furniture, whatever it is that they need, sir.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**



PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #11

**Commissioner: Thank you. [applause] Oscar Martinez?**

Participant #11: I'm not here to give testimony. I told the young lady who was passing that tablet around that I wanted to ask a question, so I think, I wonder if that's okay.

**Commissioner: Sure, absolutely.**

**Commissioner: Absolutely, go ahead.**

Participant #11: Okay.

**Commissioner: If it's a hard one, I'm going to make Mariana answer it.**

**Commissioner: I'll make Rus answer it.**

Participant #11: Well, it might be a hard one. I'm the Coordinator of the Social Justice Education Project in El Paso and we hold forums periodically on social justice issues. In fact, a few weeks ago we held a forum right here at La Fe on food justice and Dr. Lois Stanford, who is here with us, was our main speaker. And so, my concern is this, that over the generations, many national commissions have been set up to investigate many topics and this is an extremely important topic. And I'm wondering, given the current circumstances and the condition in the U.S. Congress, and the fact that the majority party doesn't really care about an issue like this. I'm visualizing that the end game for this Commission is to write a report and thank you for all your work and all the time that you invest in this but this is what I think that you will do. Write a report on the scope of hunger in the country and include information about El Paso and I would think that it comes down to increasing resources to address all these problems that we have across the country but the Republican party doesn't really care about something like this. So I'm wondering how you folks feel about the possibility or the probability, it depends on if this majority party continues to dominate the Congress, how you feel about the possibility that you invested all this time and all these folks who testify, invest time in coming here, and it is all worthwhile to document all this but the bottom line is that across the country, a lot more resources are needed to deal with these problems and we have a situation in this country where a lot of problems are not being addressed simply because we have a political system that represents the top sector of society and the people who make the decisions in the Congress have shown time and again that they're not going to fund programs like this. So maybe I certainly don't have the kind of information that you have and I'm wondering how optimistic you are in eventual results to address these problems.



**Commissioner: Yeah, Mr. Martinez, that is a very provocative statement and question and I bet we all want to answer. So I'm going to turn to my fellow Commissioners—**

**Commissioner: Oh, yeah.**

**Commissioner: —and just say, “Let's keep this, let's keep our total remarks at 3 to 4 minutes total [Laughter] between all of us,” because I don't want to eat up the rest of the time to hear from the rest of the community because I know we could probably each give you 15 to 20 minutes on that. Thanks for asking us. Rus, go ahead.**

**Commissioner: I'll be very brief. I'll say a few things and I'm not going to say anything about parties. I will say that the Commission was bipartisanly appointed, the ten members, five by Republicans, five by Democrats. There may not always be agreement on how to address issues but there's at least acknowledgement that there are issues. There is a danger in any commission because there's a commission born every minute on every topic conceivable that a report will not be read by as many as should read it or will not take it as seriously as we intend it to be. We don't want to suffer from the same inertia as the Congress, so we will do our due diligence to agree on an array of issues we can agree on and we will do our best to promote what we say and provide evidence-based rationale but people should take it seriously. You're certainly correct that we can't promise, any of us, no matter what side of the aisle appointed us, that there will be a major agenda developed by virtue of what we say or do or write but I think it would be wrong of us, one, to label it as an issue that one side that doesn't care about at all. I think the issue is that sometimes there's disagreements. I also will say, and Jeremy might have said this, as well, in fact, one of the prime movers of the fact that this Commission was created was former Congressman Frank Wolf, who happened to be a Republican from the state of Virginia, is that right?**

**Commissioner: Yes.**

**Commissioner: And so I just want you to be assured that we will work as hard as we can to come to agreement on points. We will work as hard as we can to promote those agreements and we will have to see what happens in the grand scheme of things for the reasons you point out.**

**Commissioner: Yeah, so I'm itching to speak and so I'll tell you what, so yeah, so the good news is, is that we did have, it was a Republican Congressman that put this forth, Frank Wolf, as he mentioned. So the Commission would not exist without a Republican Congressman, you know, pushing this through a very conservative Congress at this point. Historically, hunger is and I'm a poverty guy. I've been working in poverty my, all of my adult life but one of the reasons that we started the**



Texas Hunger Initiative is because hunger was one aspect, merely an aspect of poverty. It's certainly not the root cause. It's a symptom but hunger has historically gotten bipartisan support and so we wanted to see if we could start with where people were and begin to expand out from there, so that we could build more socially just communities. To the point that, yes, we are a commission. Our job is simply to write up recommendations and send them to Congress and then send them to the Secretary of Agriculture. It could very easily be one of the many reports that get filed where nothing happens with it but that's where we need you. So we've listened, inaction was not an option, so when they created this Commission, they asked us to be a part of this. This is what we do. We all, many of us live and work in low income communities. I've lived in a low income neighborhood since I was 21 so that we could be around what people were experiencing day-in and day-out, after hours and on the weekends. So this issue is the issue that we feel called to address but we don't have enough collective power among a ten-member bipartisan commission to change the direction of the wind but we can get involved. So when we take all these, all this information and we coalesce it and we write down our 10 or 20 or 30 different recommendations that we can come up with, that we can agree to, we're going to need your help. So otherwise, this will be, it will be a futile effort. I will be leaving my family for a week for no reason but I believe that we can make a difference. My staff knows, I say this all the time, that every generation is judged by history based upon what they do or don't do to further the cause of justice. When we see all these images of civil rights leaders on the wall in here and we know that in the '60s when we think about the civil rights era, we judge that generation based upon what they did or didn't do to further the cause of civil rights. And I believe wholeheartedly that those of us in this room today will be judged based upon what we do or do not do to further the cause of those living in hunger and in poverty. So the question isn't just to us, those of us sitting behind this table, the question is to all of us in the room, what are we going to do about it? So hopefully, you've given us some great recommendations and hopefully, we can collectively work together to change the direction of the wind. I think I used up all of our time.

Commissioner: You did use up all of our time but I want to add [Laughter], I want you to see that I agree with these two gentlemen 100% both of them, both Republican appointees to the bipartisan Commission. We wouldn't be here if we weren't putting our whole body and soul into this issue. This very act of what we're doing right now, this is, yes, about creating a report. What's going to end up in the report is something that we'll be able to, someone will be able to read it in about 17 minutes but we've spent the entire day here. Everything that we're doing right now is being recorded and will be made available on the web. Many people don't have access to the web and that's a very big problem and we need to change that but this is, what we're doing in this moment is way beyond the report. This is a conversation that will last a generation and that will inspire another generation. We have elders in the room. We



**have some very young people in the room that have been a part of it. This act itself is a form of social justice and it really is, you can't just put all of your hope into a single report. That report, yes, is a little bit of a flea in the wind but let's not be the flea, let's be the wind and blow away the rest of those fleas and get something done in this country. This is something that takes much more than a report. It takes all of us working together and insisting that this is meaningful and valuable. Among the four of us here, we've probably worked with 10,000 families, especially Dr. Frank and I, we know the families that are experiencing food insecurity, and Jeremy, and I have to say, Rus, too. Those families are our families. We're fighting for our people. You all are fighting for your people. But I think Jeremy said it best, so thank you for asking the question. This is extremely important and valuable work.**

**Commissioner: It was, yeah.**

**Commissioner: Now Debbie's going to—**

**Commissioner: Just one, I was always told that a pebble can change the course of a river. So I guess we're trying to be a pretty big pebble but we're, it takes lots of pebbles.**

**Participant #11: Just a follow up—**

**Commissioner: Sure.**

**Participant #11: My issue is not with members of the Commission. I share your values. I think we have the same values. My issue is with the Congress and the Congress needs to change. The Congress needs to change because they're not, the way it is now, they're not receptive to the wonderful recommendations that I am sure you are going to make in your report. So you're right, the challenge is with all of us.**

**Commissioner: Right.**

**Commissioner: Uh-huh [yes].**

**Participant #11: All of us, the American people, the voters, the activists, we have a big challenge ahead of us, so we need to, all of us need to commit ourselves to this kind of change.**

**Commissioner: Yeah, well, Mr. Martinez, thanks for asking us a question and thank you for your work and we, one of the exciting things about seeing the young adults here is we have to increase democratic engagement. If we don't like the Congress, we have an opportunity to change that and so, but if we stand passively aside then**



**they're certainly not going to do anything to help us out and so I commend your question and your sentiment, so thank you.**

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

Participant #11: Thank you.



PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #12

**Commissioner: Nahomi Martinez?**

Participant #12: Hi, good afternoon.

**Commissioner: Hello, yeah.**

Participant #12: Hope you're doing well. You probably had a really long day. I, my name's Nahomi. I am a Masters of Social Work student at UTEP and right now I'm doing my internship at the Opportunity Center and I wasn't expecting to speak today but I was inspired by all the people around me just to dedicate a few minutes to, you know, to represent the people that we serve as public servants. I didn't prepare a speech but I'm going to talk from the only place my community taught me from and that's my heart.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**

Participant #12: If I could, you've asked us for resolutions and so on and so forth, recommendations, and the three things that I can think of is to please inform Congress about the infrastructure in El Paso. Let them know what our policymakers are doing or not doing. Secondly, please, really speak out about our testimonials. Many of us come from low income and we have a threshold for low income but sometimes we really don't know what low income is until it's nothing and some of us don't have that experience and we need to empathize with that. And lastly, I know you're only addressing hunger right now but unfortunately, with all the systems in place, that's not the only issue we are attacking with hunger but it's a basic human right and then if we can provide that for the people that we serve, then we can sure, you know, improve other conditions. I'm sure there's some mental health professionals, our healthcare system is debatable at times. Our employment situation, sometimes it's difficult so, please, let the big people in the big places know what it's, what El Paso is like, and lastly, I would like to invite you to the 2015 State of the Homelessness State Conference, which takes place in the fall of 2015 this year, where there will be policymakers, people who have experienced homelessness personally, speaking of the different issues that they're experiencing right now. I'm more than happy to give you my information and once again, thank you for hearing us all and also, I would like to use this platform to say that if resources in this community are connected, please, get in touch with each other. Please, share your resources. It's great that you're helping people but it's better we help them together. This is a call to action to address hunger and I would really love for every single active community member, if not active, become active, to really take action on this. Thank you.

**Commissioner: Thank you.**





**Commissioner: Thank you. [applause]**



PUBLIC TESTIMONY PARTICIPANT #6 (returned to clarify questions)

**Commissioner: We have a couple of people on the list that signed in, that submitted their names, I want to make sure that they have an opportunity, Gloria Martinez? Gloria? Christopher Rodriguez? Mr. Rivera, did you have an additional comment? I think that's it.**

**Commissioner: Okay.**

Participant #6: Carlos Rivera, President, Legacy of Valor, I just wanted to follow up, one of your questions, Mariana, was regarding active duty military.

**Commissioner: Yeah.**

Participant #6: And my organization is conducting a survey of local veterans and veterans organizations during the month of July and we'll add an active duty military component to that and we'll share that, you know, those results in August. I would also like to touch on the issue regarding the Purple Heart recipient veteran that was talked about. The only way that you get a Purple Heart is when you get injured as a result of enemy firing combat. So you know that this guy was in serious combat. The question was why was he turned down and I'll just give a little bit of information on the state of veterans affairs from the veterans' perspective and that is about 4 years ago, the VA was about 900,000, almost a million claims behind as far as a backlog and resolving veterans' claims for benefits. This year the VA reports that that number is down to 300,000. My experience, because I review a lot of claims that come back, the majority are coming back denied now and one of the patterns that I see is that the VA is looking for reasons to deny claims rather than giving the veterans the benefit of the doubt and granting their claims and that's a pattern that I'm picking up right now. I have another case that I'd like to leave you with. Last year I was asked to go visit a veteran and ask him, help him with his claim for VA benefits. When I arrived at his home, as I was walking in, the El Paso Electric Company utility people were coming out. They had just turned his utilities off and the gas company had just come and gone about an hour before that. And the water utilities guy was scheduled to come in the following day. So he was going to be out of utilities. He had no money, otherwise, he would be paying his utilities and when I walked into his home, he had no food. So my objective of helping him with the VA claim was immediately changed from helping with a claim to helping with basic needs. The Texas Veterans Commission has a state veterans fund that it offers to help veterans. There's about five local agencies that receive the funds to help veterans with emergency funds for mortgage, for rent, utilities, food and but, unfortunately, the veteran did not know about any of these resources. So since I knew the resource network, I called the five agencies that were listed as receiving funds to help veterans. One responded by saying he has to come in, pick up an application, and will see him in two weeks. Okay, another one responded, all I got was a phone number, I mean, a message and it says, 'If this



is Monday, we only work Monday, I mean, from 8:00 to 12:00, and if you didn't get somebody on the line, you had to call back. So I said, unfortunately, it was a Monday, so there was nobody answering the phone and nobody, we did leave a message but never got a return call. So needless to say, the other three agencies also had similar policies in place where you had to pick up applications, make an appointment, and more than likely, it would take two weeks but these veterans need help now. They cannot wait. He also had medical issues and he pulled out a little vial with several teeth in it. He had dental problems. He used to be a Special Forces Medic in the Army, so he was pulling his own teeth out and fortunately, for me, my Vice Commander with our organization is a dentist, so I called him and I told him we have this situation and he says, "Bring him in," and he took care of that. He had other medical conditions, you know, also Post Traumatic Stress and but fortunately, I lucked out. I did take him to the VA and I expected to just walk in, get him registered 8:00 in the morning and set up an appointment. Fortunately, for us, that day there were other cancellations and we were able to get him a medical exam, a psychiatric exam, an audiology exam, and scheduled for mental health. So that was a good result on the VA side. I have good things to speak about their healthcare providers. They have good people. The problem is appointments, getting veterans in. So on the healthcare side, it's just a long time to get veterans in for appointments. On the benefit side, it's just as I mentioned earlier. The trend seems to be looking for ways to deny claims rather than grant claims and that hurts. That's like what you heard about and that's why we formed Legacy of Valor, to intervene on behalf of these veterans. To do research to identify the gaps and to develop programs to meet those needs and again, I thank you for your time. I thank you for coming to El Paso and I look forward to future contact with you and hope we can work together to, I don't know that we can eliminate homelessness and poverty but at least we can help the cause and minimize it. Thank you.

**Commissioner: That's right. Thank you, Mr. Rivera.**

**Commissioner: Thank you very much.**

**Commissioner: We appreciate it. [applause] This concludes today's hearing and our El Paso visit. I want to, again, thank the El Paso community for welcoming us this week and for educating us. You've been an incredibly hospitable community. I especially want to thank Mr. Balcorta and the La Fe staff for hosting us. They met us here at 7:30 this morning. The place was already set up when we got here at 7:30 in the morning and then they took us around to see all the wonderful activities that they're doing here. It's just a tremendous place. They fed us and that's not lost on us, given how we're talking about the issue of hunger. We are grateful for their provision to make sure that we had healthy food to eat today at lunch. We're also grateful for the Sacred Heart Catholic Church for providing our breakfast this morning. They made some fantastic pineapple empanadas and I highly suggest them, if you have a chance to go by and they were small, so I think I ate a dozen of those with a dozen**



**cups of coffee. So I'll be jittering for two days. I want to thank our interpreter. I don't know how you did that but we are grateful for your willingness to come and participate, so that everything could be made available in both English and Spanish, grateful to the THI, Texas Hunger Initiative regional staff for working as our host this week and setting up, working to set up this hearing and our site visits and to RTI International for providing assistance to the Commissioners and to my fellow Commissioners, there are four of us left. We began the day with a few more but they had to catch flights to go back home and so we are, I am grateful for the service of my colleagues. Thank you and have a good weekend.**

**Commissioner: Thank you, everybody. [applause]**