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National Commission on Hunger Public Hearing, Hosted by the Management and Residents of the Marbury Plaza Apartments - 2300 Good Hope Road, SE DC 20020

July 14, 2015

Testimony of George A. Jones, Bread for the City

My name is George A. Jones and I am the CEO of Bread for the City. Bread for the City is a District of Columbia nonprofit, whose mission is to fight poverty by providing food, clothing, medical, legal, and comprehensive social services to families and individuals living on low incomes.

It is my pleasure to testify before this National Commission on Hunger here at Marbury Plaza Apartments in Southeast DC. Thanks to all of the staff, management and volunteers at Marbury Plaza for graciously agreeing to host this important community hearing.

It is appropriate for Bread for the City's story to be shared at a hearing centering on hunger and food insecurity. Appropriate, since for nearly 40 years, Bread has served as one of the largest if not the largest free food pantry operating here in Washington, DC. Each year, we provide more than 25,000 individuals with free groceries designed to supplement the personal resources these community members have to secure food.

But as described in our mission, we believe that a holistic response to poverty is needed, as issues like hunger rarely occur in a vacuum. Hunger, like limited access to affordable housing and quality healthcare, are just the consequences of poverty. Through our Social Services program, for example, we have literally helped thousands of DC residents apply for SNAP and other public benefits in the quest to alleviate some of the suffering experienced by those trying to live on low or no incomes.

So as this Commission considers effective ways to strengthen the federal programs and public policies designed to address hunger, like SNAP, School Lunches, The Emergency Food Assistance Program, and so forth, my first appeal is for the Commission to remember food insecurity is just one aspect of the persistent burden that is poverty.

To the end of addressing hunger, I stand in solidarity with the other local and national hunger advocates in urging the USDA and Congress to not only reverse past cuts to the SNAP program, but to significantly increase the

benefit during a time when the income gap between SNAP recipients and the middle and upper class seems to widen with each passing year. This income disparity is felt here locally and throughout the country.

In the very Ward where we are conducting this hearing the statistics on hunger and income are startling:

- Over 42,000 of the 70,000 Ward 8 residents receive SNAP benefits
- 51% of the children living in Ward 8 live in poverty
- 22% of the elderly in live in poverty
- The average income of Ward 8 families is slightly under \$43,973

By contrast, in DC's Ward3:

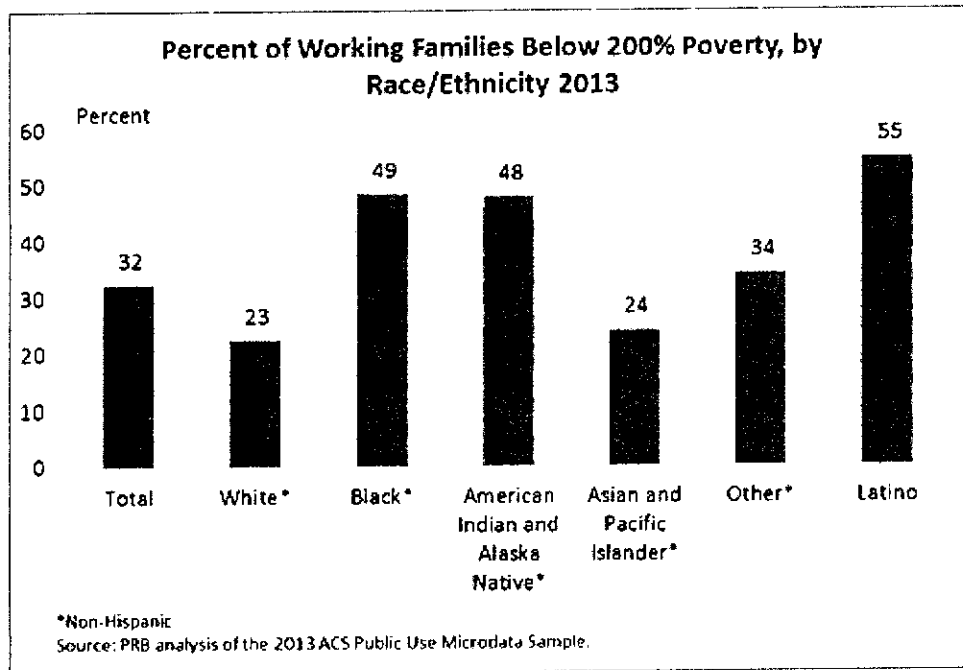
- Only 598 of the 77,000 in the Ward residents receive SNAP benefits
- 3% of the children living in Ward 8 live in poverty
- 3% of the elderly in live in poverty
- The average income of Ward 3 families is over \$246,00
- (The average DC income is \$119,000)

Exacerbating the disparities between these two groups of DC residents is the fact that housing costs in DC are spiraling upward at a record pace. I've heard that "affordable" rental housing costs in Ward 8 will soon be at \$2,000 per month for a two-bedroom apartment. That's \$24,000 per year; meaning the average family will need to pay more than 50% of its income to live in Ward 8.

Another statistical comparison worth noting is that 94% of the residents living in Ward 8 are African American. Four percent are people identifying as white. In 2014, 83% of Ward 3 residents identified as white, meaning 17% of the residents are people of color (7% are Hispanic and 5% are African American).

Unfortunately, these kind of double and triple digit race disparities exists throughout the US – worst of all in urban centers like DC, New York, Detroit, etc.

In an economic analysis included in a recent *Washington Post* article:



Feeding America reports that African Americans are more than twice as likely to suffer from food insecurity as whites.

And if you think my point is that people of color, or recipients of SNAP and other USDA programs, have it bad, you are only half right. I believe that increasingly, Americans are going to realize that these disparities are very bad for all us.

I believe that this Commission and all of us more privileged Americans need to heed the words from a letter written in 1963 by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, from a Birmingham, Alabama jail. Dr. King warned that:

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly”.

To drive home Dr. King’s prophesy, in a study shared during the Consumer Health Foundation’s 2015 annual meeting, it was reported that in 1950, there were 16 Americans paying into Social Security for everyone one person receiving the benefit. The study also pointed out that currently in America, for every \$1 earned by people identifying as white, African Americans and Hispanics earn a little over \$.50. The study then projected that by 2060, there will only be 2 people paying in to Social Security for every one person receiving the benefit. And of those 2 people paying into Social Security one will be a person of color. So if it is not clear in 2016 that the income disparity disproportionately affecting people of color today will be everyone’s problem, it will be crystal clear in 2060. Of course it may be too late to do much about it then.

Expanding the quantity of SNAP benefits recipients receive helps those living on low incomes become more food secure, which reduces the adverse impact that hungry children and workers experience as they try to learn and work. And importantly, as the USDA reports, for every \$1 spent on SNAP benefits, there is a \$2 impact on the economy. As Dr. King himself might have put it, when we tax payers help increase benefits like SNAP to our brothers and sisters, we help ourselves.

At Bread for the City, we are trying to practice what I've preached about today. We are more and more trying to reconstruct our programs and policies to intentionally account for the implicit bias that drives many of the socioeconomic disparities people of color experience. We are doing many things to try to help reverse the trend of race-based disparities, but the most basic practice we have committed to is that we will not behave as gatekeepers for people seeking access to our services. Rather, we want to serve as gateways to the healthcare and clothing, to the social and legal services, and of course to the food that our fellow community members seek from us.

When and if the Commission chooses to ponder how it can help reverse the trends of food insecurity and other socioeconomic disparities disproportionately affecting people of color, I suggest each of you start by seeing yourselves as gateways to economic justice for the poor, and not gatekeepers to that justice.

Again, I thank the Commission and other guests for the privilege of sharing my views with you today.