

Testimony by USDA Food and Nutrition Service Administrator Audrey Rowe

Hunger Commission Public Hearing

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Marbury Plaza - 2300 Good Hope Rd SE, Washington, DC 20020.

- Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.
- When I was living at this apartment complex over 40 years ago, I never thought I'd find myself here again to deliver testimony on hunger. This development has been the home of many City and Federal Officials who worked to promote equity and social justice.
- I'm glad to be back here in this very familiar spot to testify before on this important issue to this Commission at this time.
- The Commission's work is critical, and I'm pleased to have the opportunity to talk about how FNS is working in every community across the country to fight hunger and improve nutrition.
- I hope the information I provide today is helpful as you formulate your recommendations to Secretary Vilsack and to Congress.
- I believe our programs are very effective at combating hunger, but there is still much work to do when it comes to improving access and addressing public perception of these programs.
- As you know, the past several years have posed extraordinary economic challenges to tens of millions of Americans.
- While the economy is showing signs of recovery, far too many families are still struggling to meet their most basic needs.
- Long-term unemployment remains a concern—29 percent of the 8.5 million people unemployed in April 2015 had been looking for work for 27 weeks or longer.
- Many employed workers are underemployed—in April 2015 6.6 million employed individuals were considered involuntary part-time workers, who either had their hours cut or could not find full-time employment.
- Our most recent data tell us that at some point in 2013 approximately 14.3 percent of all households in the United States experienced food insecurity—food intake of one or more household members was reduced or their eating patterns were disrupted because the household lacked money or resources for food.

- When it comes to food insecurity and hunger, demographics matters:
 - Food insecurity impacts approximately 19.5 percent of households with children under the age of 18.
 - Food insecurity is also a major concern for elderly people who live alone. About 9 percent of those experience trouble putting food on the table.
 - 11 percent of households with a white household head, 26 percent of households with an African-American household head, and 23 percent of households with a Hispanic household head experienced food insecurity in 2013.
 - The prevalence of food insecurity also varies geographically—it is slightly higher in the South than it is in the Northeast, and also slightly higher in rural areas than in cities.
- **These findings show that while conditions may vary in prevalence and severity, hunger doesn't discriminate. We need innovative solutions that help different types of communities reduce food insecurity.**
- I'd love to talk about all 15 programs, but because time is limited I'll focus on a few areas that we are emphasizing at FNS—SNAP, Expansion of School Meals and Summer Meals, and the grants we've provided in rural and Native American communities to improve access and nutrition education.
- **SNAP remains the nation's largest anti-hunger program reaching 1 in 7 Americans.**
 - We collectively have a responsibility to help 46 million Americans fight poverty and put healthy food on the table. We also have a responsibility to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars as we do so.
 - SNAP's impact on food security is substantial—reducing the likelihood of food insecurity by about 30 percent and the likelihood of very low food insecurity by 20 percent.
 - SNAP also:
 - **Supports work.** Among SNAP households with at least one working-age, non-disabled adult, more than half work while receiving SNAP and more than 80 percent work in the year prior to or the year after receiving SNAP. Rates are even higher for families with children.
 - In 2013, the vast majority, or about 84 percent, of SNAP participants were working,

living with an employed person, or were not expected to work due to their age or disability.

- **Fights poverty.** When SNAP benefits are added to gross income, 12 percent of—or almost 3 million—SNAP households move above the poverty line. Impacts are well-targeted to the poorest households, moving 14 percent of them above 50 percent of the poverty line.
- **Helps the most vulnerable Americans.**
 - As Secretary Vilsack noted this week, about one in five SNAP participants are either elderly or disabled.
 - This week we published a proposed rule aimed at improving access to groceries for homebound elderly and disabled SNAP participants.
 - The rule proposes to let grocery purchasing and delivery services run by government and non-profit organizations to accept SNAP benefits as payment for the first time.
 - This will allow for home delivery to those unable to shop for food, which is an important step forward in serving the needs of this very vulnerable population.
 - This issue has a particular importance for rural America as seniors in rural communities are more likely to experience poverty.
 - Soon we will begin seeking up to 20 food purchasing and delivery services to participate in a one year pilot program.
 - The lessons we learn during the pilot will be used to help shape the final rule.
- Although SNAP is a critical safety net we know that it is not the ultimate answer for families.
- There is a need to equip those who are able to work with the skills they need to find a good job.
- SNAP must work to connect people with the long-term employment opportunities that give them true economic stability. The SNAP E&T program can serve as a powerful tool in this regard.
- **The 2014 Farm Bill authorized and funded \$200 million to fund and evaluate new SNAP Employment and Training pilot programs in 10 states.** They test a wide array of approaches—including career pathways, rapid attachment to work, work-based learning, and other job-driven strategies—and reflect the diversity of the SNAP population.

- **The hope is that the successful pilots can be adopted by other states, over time.**
- **Building up E&T resources in every state, thereby helping SNAP participants find work and gain skills valued by employers, is a priority and a key factor in helping participants become self-sufficient and put enough food on the table to feed their families.**
- It's pretty well known that the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act made historic changes to nutritional standards for what is served in school breakfast and lunch programs.
- But what folks might not know is how many families rely on school breakfast and school lunch to ease the burden of providing meals in households with children.
- About 21 million students receive free or reduced price school lunches.
- **In addition to new meals standards, the Act provided local educational agencies and schools in low-income areas with an alternative approach for operating school meals programs.**
- In lieu of collecting individual applications for free and reduced-price meals, the CEP allows qualifying educational agencies and schools to use information from other means-tested programs like SNAP and TANF to determine the level of Federal funding.
- We phased this program in over 3 years and opened it up nationwide last summer.
- In this first year of national implementation, more than 2,000 school districts used CEP for some or all schools, reaching more than 6.3 million students. We are doing everything we can to let educational agencies know about community eligibility as an option.
- **Community eligibility can work in tandem with other creative meal service models that we encourage such as "grab and go" kiosks and breakfast in the classroom.**
- I was recently in Massachusetts at a school that serves breakfast in the classroom and the response from students has been tremendous.
- Staff already reports reductions in absenteeism and visits to the nurse as a result of the program.
- We're hearing the same positive feedback from other schools who have implemented similar programs.
- Expanding access to school breakfast beyond the 12 million students who participate each day

is a high priority.

- We continue to support creative ways to reach more young people with nutritious breakfast options.
- **For many young people, the meal they eat at school is the healthiest meal they get all day. But what happens during the summer months when school meals are not available?**
- The Summer Food Service Program helps ensure children and teens get a safe place to play and eat a meal at no cost.
- Although it has been challenging to reach as many young people as we'd like given the rules regarding congregate feeding, we've made it a priority to expand access to Summer Meals.
- Employing a variety of creative approaches:
 - Mapping technology to help determine areas of need and connect with partners who can open sites.
 - Summer meals site finder—go to www.fns.usda.gov/summerfoodrocks on computers or smartphones, plug in zip code, find the location, hours of operation and contact info for nearby summer meal sites.
 - Certain high-need rural and tribal communities will get the help of nearly 60 AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates to help recruit volunteers, raise awareness, and provide operational support.

We're also teaming up with organizations like the National Football League, Feeding America, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Catholic Charities, Feed the Children PepsiCo, Share Our Strength, YMCA and many, many others to help raise awareness, target outreach, and deliver meals in rural and urban areas.

- We're also continuing the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) for Children projects, which provide a household benefit to low-income children during the summer. These projects, first funded by Congress in 2010, have proven successful in reducing food insecurity and improving nutrition among participating children during the summer. A rigorous evaluation found that these projects reduced very low food security among children by one-third, and also improved the quality of their diets, relative to those that did not have

access to it. They offer an important complement to the congregate summer meals programs, and we look forward to expanding this proven program in future years.

- Last summer we served 187 million meals nationwide and we plan to keep the momentum going this summer.
- **The HHFKA Act also made it possible for us to award 27 million in grants to projects in Kentucky, Nevada and Virginia, as well as the Chickasaw and Navajo tribal nations to test innovative strategies to end childhood hunger.** The projects target areas or populations with elevated levels of food insecurity or gaps in nutrition assistance program coverage.
- Because the needs of Native American Tribes are so great, I'm especially excited about the projects that will be conducted by Tribal Nations:
 - The Chickasaw Nation will implement a Nutrition Services Demonstration Project to End Childhood Hunger, which will provide food through home delivery to households with children who qualify for free school meals.
 - The Navajo Nation Division of Health will implement the Food Access Navigation Project, which will employ Food Access Navigators to evaluate assets and gaps in food access in selected regions of the reservation and provide technical assistance for connecting eligible households to nutrition assistance programs.
- To further improve food and program access to Tribes a couple studies are underway.
 - One examines the Characteristics of Households in the Food Distribution
 - Program on Indian Reservations program, to help us understand who is participating in FDPIR, and any barriers to participation.
 - A second study looks at the feasibility of Tribal operation of other nutrition assistance programs.
- Food insecurity and hunger remain a problem in Indian Country and we are committed to furthering the Presidential Priority on improving outcomes for Native families.
- Once again, I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak to you all on the work our agency is doing to maximize the effectiveness of nutrition assistance programs and decrease food insecurity nationwide.

- **I hope that your series of field hearings are helping not only to uncover the face of food insecurity in America, but to identify strategies and recommendations.**
- I look forward to partnering with you, and with Congress, to build on our successes to better prevent—and ultimately end—the problem of hunger and food insecurity. Thank you for your time and attention.