

**Public Testimony of Alexandra Ashbrook
Director, D.C. Hunger Solutions**

**National Hunger Commission
July 14, 2015**

Washington, DC

My name is Alexandra Ashbrook. For over eight years, I have been the director of D.C. Hunger Solutions, an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). In my work, I've learned two fundamental truths about hunger. First, its existence in any prosperous nation is a moral disgrace. And second, hunger can be solved. Indeed, if the United Nations has been successful in meeting its Millennium Development Goals of reducing the proportion of undernourished people in the world's developing regions by nearly half since 1990,¹ there is no reason that we cannot eliminate hunger in the world's most affluent country.

But solving hunger demands an aggressive approach that recognizes the pernicious and long lasting impact of both very low food security and low food security, as well as the struggles and potential hunger of those the government calls "marginally food secure"; builds on the large body of research about what solutions work; and acknowledges that shared economic prosperity and a strong public sector safety net are precursors to any plan.

I. The Devastating Impact of Food Insecurity—Even Moderate Levels of Food Insecurity

Let me start by highlighting some research on how food insecurity—not just very low food security— hurts people at every stage of development:

The harm to both children and adults facing hunger and even moderate levels of food insecurity is great. Here are just a few examples:

- Food insecurity puts children at risk of poor child health, developmental risks, behavior problems, depression, and low academic performance.
- Maternal undernutrition increases the risk of certain birth defects and contributes to low infant birthweight.

¹ The proportion has decreased from 23.3 percent in 1990–1992 to 12.9 percent in 2014–2016, at p 4. Report available at: http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20%28July%201%29.pdf,

- Food insecurity among very young children can cause stunted growth, iron deficiency anemia, and delayed cognitive development.
- For preschoolers and school-aged children, food insecurity’s many adverse outcomes include: harm to physical growth and immune systems; weakened resistance to infection; and children lagging behind their peers and learning less.

Food insecurity during the adult years means lower productivity, higher rates of hospitalization, and poorer health. Adult hunger also harms children even when children get enough to eat. Often low-income parents or grandparents do everything they can to protect the children in the household from hunger: they feed the children first and skip meals themselves, though the child’s filling meal may not be a balanced, healthy diet. But when the adults go hungry, the resulting adult stress and depression harm not only them but also the children’s health, mental health, and schooling.

Recommendation: The Commission should focus its work on addressing the issue of food insecurity, rather than the small sub-set of those identified at one point in time as experiencing very low food security. Why:

- The charge of the National Commission on Hunger is to address policies “to combat domestic hunger and food insecurity” and the Commission should provide recommendations aligned with this important charge.²
- The consequences of food insecurity –including those consequences described in the “Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security in America: A Review of Current Research”³ prepared at the behest of the Commission – are catastrophic for millions of Americans who are outside the very low food security identifier.
- “Food insecurity tends to be episodic”⁴ which makes it problematic to confine the analysis of addressing food insecurity to a fluid sub-set of people who are challenging to identify.

² According to its website, the “The National Commission on Hunger was formed to ‘(1) provide policy recommendations to Congress and the Secretary [of Agriculture] to more effectively use existing programs and funds of the Department of Agriculture to combat domestic hunger and food insecurity; and (2) develop innovative recommendations to encourage public-private partnerships, faith-based sector engagement, and community initiatives to reduce the need for government nutrition assistance programs, while protecting the safety net for the most vulnerable members of society.’”

³ *Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security in America: A Review of Current Research* (July 2014) (Hereinafter Report). Available at:

http://www.rti.org/pubs/full_hunger_report_final_07-24-14.pdf

⁴ Report at 1-1.

- “Although the HFFS (Household Food Security Scale) is a validated measure, some researchers have identified limitations associated with it. Some have posited that this underreporting may arise from lower thresholds for interpreting deprivation or more adaptive coping strategies.” (Quoting p. 1-5 from “Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security in America: A Review of Current Research”)

II. Time-Tested Solutions that Work

Our work in D.C. to address hunger always begins with maximizing access to the federal nutrition programs (school breakfast and lunch; afterschool, summer, and child care nutrition programs; SNAP; and WIC)—true miracles of public policy— through outreach, advocacy, technical assistance, and collaboration. The federal nutrition programs are proven, readily-available solutions to combat food insecurity and hunger. By providing federal funding for food, these programs not only reduce food insecurity and hunger, but also improve nutrition, health, early childhood development, school achievement, and overall well-being. By leveraging millions of dollars to purchase food at area grocery stores and farmers’ markets and create jobs in food retail, school cafeterias, and nutrition sites, the federal nutrition programs also provide economic stimulus for low-income households and D.C. as a whole.

The Commission’s contracted report “Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security in America: A Review of Current Research” bolsters the wisdom of how connecting low-income people to the federal nutrition programs is an effective strategy to reduce food insecurity and improve nutrition as do multiple reports and importantly, conversations with program participants.

Here are just a few examples of how these programs work not only to reduce food insecurity but also to improve a range of health and social outcomes:

- According to a new analysis, SNAP lifted 10.3 million people above the poverty line in 2012, comparable to the number lifted out by the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit together. 4.9 million of those lifted out of poverty were children. SNAP plays a critical role not just in alleviating poverty and food insecurity, but also in improving dietary intake and health, especially among children.
- The school lunch and breakfast programs reduce hunger and obesity, lift hundreds of thousands of additional children out of poverty, provide a substantial share of the key nutrients children need each day, reduce school nurse visits, and improve attendance, student behavior and educational achievement.

An Initiative of the Food Research and Action Center

1200 18th Street, NW – Suite 400 – Washington, DC 20036 – phone 202.640.1088 – fax 202.640.1085
www.dchunger.org

- The out-of-school time nutrition programs (summer food and afterschool food) attract hungry children to school-based and community-based programs that keep them safe, active, learning and engaged, provide positive activities, and improve nutritional intake.
- CACFP improves preschoolers' nutrition, reduces obesity, strengthens the quality of child care, and helps boost and stabilize caregivers' incomes and services.
- Participation of women, infants, and young children in WIC boosts rates of prenatal care, reduces low birthweight and infant mortality, reduces childhood obesity, and saves money in health systems.

Any plan to address hunger must seize the opportunity to maximize access to all of these programs and promote policy ideas that can improve the use and impact of these programs. Imagine if the Commission took action to propose an increase in the SNAP benefit by 10 percent; according to a recent USDA report this would reduce the number of SNAP households with very low food security by 22 percent.⁵

Recommendations: As a starting point, the Commission should adopt all the recommendations from “Strengthening the Federal Nutrition Assistance Program” (pp. 5-3- 5-5) section of its commissioned report “Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security in America: A Review of Current Research.”

The Commission should ensure that all of its recommendations related to the federal nutrition programs remove access barriers, help improve participation, and allow for growth in these programs so that the nutrition programs can respond to the needs of food insecure families in good times and in bad. Of note:

SNAP

Cutting or changing the structure of SNAP would harm not just millions of the neediest people in our country but would damage states and localities and overwhelm charities that are already unable to meet the need.

Instead the Commission should act to:

- Raise the full allotment level to the Low-Cost Food Plan, rather than the inadequate Thrifty Food Plan.
- Maintain SNAP choice.
- Continue to prohibit split issuance.

⁵ Nord, M. (2013). *Effects of the Decline in the Real Value of SNAP Benefits from 2009 to 2011*. Economic Research Report, 151. Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

- Let all households use the medical deduction so that they need not choose between health care and food.
- Eliminate the shelter cap.

Child Nutrition Programs

- The Commission should adopt the recommendations contained in two bicameral bills—the Summer Meals Act of 2015 (S. 613 / H.R. 1728), introduced by Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Representatives Don Young (R-AK) and Rick Larsen (D-WA) and the Stop Child Summer Hunger Act of 2015 (S. 1539, H.R. 2715) introduced by Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Representative Susan Davis (D-CA)—that have the potential to dramatically reduce hunger during the summer months when school lets out.

III. The Federal Nutrition Programs Cannot End Hunger Alone

The “Current and Prospective Scope of Hunger and Food Security in America: A Review of Current Research” concludes that being low income, while not always predictive, is a strong risk factor for food insecurity. Consequently, addressing hunger requires investments in strategies that raise incomes and reduce the costs of expenses like quality child care, housing, transportation, health care, and advanced job training or education.

Many of the federal nutrition programs – especially SNAP and WIC – provide income support to households but improving household economic security cannot be left to the nutrition programs alone. The Report “Strengthening Household Economic Security” (a section 5.1) details critical strategies that the Commission should adopt.

Other key investments for the Commission to consider recommending include:

1. Raising the minimum wage and indexing it to inflation.
2. Promoting policies like paid sick leave, and paid family leave to help improve maternal and infant nutrition and well-being.

In conclusion, the convening of a National Hunger Commission presents an opportune time for our nation to come together to address hunger. Let’s make this moment in time count.

Respectfully submitted,

Alexandra Ashbrook