

**Testimony of Heather Renae Cosson, Director of Communications,  
National Foundation to End Senior Hunger  
Before the National Commission on Hunger**

**July 14, 2015**

Thank you Commission Members for allowing me to speak with you today. I am Heather Renae Cosson, and I work at the National Foundation to End Senior Hunger, NFESH, as Director of Communications. It is my responsibility to get people talking and thinking about the problem of senior hunger and how we can solve this growing problem. That is precisely why I'm here with you today.

In 2008, NFESH commissioned the first-ever comprehensive national study on food insecurity among individuals aged 60 and older in the United States. We have commissioned updates each year, and the problem continues to go in the wrong direction. The number of seniors affected by hunger has more than doubled since 2001. Our most recent report showed that in 2013, 15.5% of seniors in the U.S. faced the threat of hunger. That means nearly ten million older Americans are going without enough to eat.

Through this research, NFESH tracks the causes and consequences of senior hunger. We know who is most vulnerable – those who live in the south, minorities, women, grandparents living in a home with a grandchild, seniors who are disabled. These are our teachers, our veterans, our farmers and our grandparents. The same people who built this great country we live in are now forced to decide if this week they'll pay for their medication or their food. Our seniors cannot remain healthy if they are not consuming the nutrients they need.

Hunger and malnutrition have severe health consequences for those over the age of 60. Research commissioned by NFESH shows that seniors at risk of hunger are 3 times more likely to suffer from depression, 50% more likely to have diabetes and 60% more likely to have congestive heart failure or experience a heart attack. These are only a few of the many complications that arise when seniors suffer from hunger.

We have been seeing the number of seniors facing hunger increase, and at the same time we learned that there is an enormous amount of food going to waste in this country. Nearly 40% of the food produced in the U.S. ends up in landfills.

We know there is more than enough food to feed every man, woman and child, and yet hunger is a major problem that continues to grow in this country. At NFESH we believe that senior hunger is solvable. We also believe that solutions should be based on data not anecdotes. These two problems – hunger and food waste, should not coexist. It doesn't make sense to have people going without enough to eat while 34 million tons of food is going to waste in landfills. It's unacceptable. So we set out to find a solution.

After countless hours researching and planning, we created a solution for the very programs that are tasked with providing food to seniors facing hunger. We have been piloting the program called What A Waste™ here in the nation's capitol with the D.C. Office on Aging. In Senior Nutrition Programs, we have been measuring and tracking the amount of food going to waste.

There are many causes of food waste. Are programs ordering too much food? Are the seniors not eating certain foods? What are the health ramifications when seniors throw away the nutrients they need instead of consuming them? How can we change the menus to solve this? Using cutting-edge technology and business practices that are helping the for-profit industry save money, we have been able to help Senior Nutrition Programs learn exactly where the food waste is coming from, why it's occurring and how we can reduce it. In restaurants and hotels, reducing food waste equals cost savings. When non-profit feeding programs become more efficient in the kitchen and dining rooms, they can serve more of the seniors who need them without increasing their budgets.

According to the Administration on Aging, the federal agency responsible for overseeing the thousands of community-based senior nutrition programs that receive federal funding through the Older Americans Act, total expenditures for these programs in 2012 was \$1.4 billion. If every program, could save 10%, which I fully believe is a conservative number, the savings would result in approximately \$140 million.

This is money that the programs could use to expand their service to feed more seniors in need. In 2012, approximately 2.5 million seniors were served through Title 3 programs funded by the Older Americans Act. Our research shows that in that same year, 9.3 million seniors faced the threat of hunger; yet only 2.5 million received these services. With nearly 7 million seniors not being reached, we cannot afford to be throwing food away.

Food waste is not only terrible morally and financially; it is also incredibly harmful to the environment. With What A Waste™, all food waste is sent to compost and turned into nutrient-rich soil. This soil is then returned to the Senior Nutrition Programs and used to create senior-friendly gardens. This provides the seniors with a healthy activity and a chance to provide for their community. The fresh vegetables grown in the gardens are used in nutrition classes and are provided to seniors in need to take home. We take what was destined for the landfill and instead use it to create a new source of healthful foods for the seniors in that community.

In the United States, we have nearly ten million seniors going without enough to eat. At the same time, 40 percent of the food in this country is being thrown away. This cannot continue. We have to make changes now or we will keep seeing the numbers of seniors facing hunger rise. We will also see the number of seniors with severe health problems increase.

Senior hunger is a growing problem in this country, but it's a problem we can solve. We only need the courage and commitment to do so.

Thank you.