

Witnesses to Hunger

Testimony of Tangela Fedrick

Member of Witnesses to Hunger

before the
National Commission on Hunger

Washington, DC
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Distinguished members of the National Commission on Hunger, thank you for considering my testimony today.

Before I begin, I just wanted to say that I know you all are looking at Very Low Food Security. I have answered all of the questions on the USDA Household food security survey and I have reported as Very Low Food Secure. Why am I telling you this? I hate that I have to say it - it's not something I want to admit. I'd much rather be telling you how I'm food secure, and that I receive a stable, predictable income that makes sure my family can eat well all the time. But that would be a lie. Because even though I work about 40 hours at a daycare center every week, and have my certificate in Early Childhood Education, I am still Very Low Food Secure.

So with that in mind, please listen closely to what I have to say about hunger.

My name is Tangela Fedrick. I am a proud mom of two kids—Asyiah age 7 and Tasir age 6. I have experienced hunger all my life. Today I want to share with you my experience of hunger, how it affects both your physical and your mental health. And I want to share with you my thoughts on how to stop hunger's dangerous effects on families like mine.

The cycle of hunger has never left my family. My siblings and I lived with my mom growing up, and we struggled with hunger. When she died, we went to live with my dad. And we struggled then. The stress of having no food affected him. He couldn't deal. He was so overwhelmed he started drinking instead of eating, and he sent us down South to our aunts, thinking we'd be better off. But we still were



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hungry there. And on top of that, we were missing our dad, and missing our mom. Hunger destroys people. It destroys families.

All my life I've known the injustice of hunger. I am definitely an expert on the topic. So when I learned about Witnesses to Hunger, I knew I had to join. Witness to Hunger is a group of parents who share their experiences with hunger and poverty. We take pictures of our own lives to show what poverty truly looks like. We are the experts on hunger and we speak on our own behalf.



Life for people like me is a lot like a locked door. We keep trying to get out, move on, but the door is locked. We don't have a key, and no one is helping us open it. I try so hard to break through—to embrace the rights, the freedoms, the opportunities I am supposedly guaranteed as a citizen of the United States. But I can't. Because when you're hungry, life only turns in a downward spiral. It takes over your physical health, your mental health, everything. It prevents you from living the life you deserve to live.

One of the first pictures I took for Witnesses to Hunger was of my daughter. She was almost one year old. I said, "She's so cute, but she's too skinny." That pretty much sums it all up. She and I have been struggling with hunger all our lives, even today. I see how much it affects our health. I'll feed Asyiah what I can, and do my very best to make sure it's the healthiest, most calorie-packed thing



I can afford, but often she's still hungry. The lack of nutrients, the lack of food to fill her belly makes her sick, causing her to throw up bile, which makes her gag, which then sends her into an asthma attack. See what I mean about a downward spiral? It's one thing after another.

It kills me to see her so sick all the time. And I know it hurts her too. Asyiah loves school. She's so smart. But every time she's sick, she misses class. And when she needs to stay home from school, that means I have to miss work. Which means a smaller paycheck, less money for food, and a greater chance of repeating this whole cycle all over again next month.

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The stress of poor physical health takes a toll on our mental health too - not just mine, but the kids'. About a year ago I lost my job, and with that, my childcare subsidy. Tasir had to leave his childcare center, which he and I both loved. He was stuck at home as I tried to piece together neighbors and family members to watch him while I looked for work. And that whole time I kept worrying about food, because he was no longer getting fed at childcare, I had to make up that difference. And we really struggled. Tasir was hungry, and he was sad. He didn't understand why he wasn't with the other kids. He would get upset, asking me if he did something wrong and that's why he wasn't at school. It broke my heart. He did nothing wrong, not at all. But it weighed on him. He wanted to be learning, with his friends, and in a place he felt safe and knew he would be fed. My neighbors, my family members—they couldn't provide that same service.

Thankfully I found another job, and Tasir entered school this past fall. He just graduated kindergarten this June. I'm so proud. He and his sister are growing up into such beautiful, kind, thoughtful kids. But I know their experiences of hunger will shape them too. And it makes me worried.

My own mental health has taken a serious toll over the years, especially since becoming a mother. I am constantly worried about putting food on the table for my kids. I myself am dangerously underweight. My body has become so accustomed to not eating. Even when there is food available, I don't eat it myself. I save it and take it home for the kids, or I leave it there so someone else can eat.

What really gets me depressed though is the injustice of my hunger. It's Ramadan, and I can't even fast because of how tiny I am, how in need of proper nutrients I am. Doctor's orders. So how crazy is that? I am an American. I have the freedom of religion. But I cannot practice my faith because of my hunger. I can't choose to go hungry to honor my religion when I'm already hungry, all the time, every day.

To solve hunger, we need to do three things:

- 1) Create a fully-funded, national plan to end hunger, and include people like me who know hunger firsthand when you create that plan. Hunger is totally solvable. We're the richest nation in the world. It is unacceptable that our kids can't eat. It is



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unacceptable that our nation knows hunger. It's not just unacceptable, it's embarrassing. We need to make solving hunger our number one national priority.

- 2) Food is a basic necessity, one that is absolutely required to live out our rights and freedoms as Americans—let's treat it as such. So many times I'll hear our elected officials talking about food like it's a luxury, like we who are hungry choose to be so. It's crazy. We all must commit ourselves to ensuring all families have enough food to live an active, healthy life style.
- 3) Protect nutrition assistance programs and ensure families can access them when they need them. School breakfast, lunch, afterschool snacks, childcare feeding—these programs are wonderful. I rely on them so much, and it relieves some of my stress to know my kids are getting food. But when school's out, or when I lose my childcare subsidy and can't afford quality daycare, or when afterschool programs are cut because of funding, that means my kids—who qualify for and need the food—can't get fed. This must change.

This is actually not my first time testifying. I spoke to the United States Department of Agriculture back in 2010 when they did listening sessions to learn about how to end hunger by 2015. And now here we are. It's 2015, and I'm back telling the same story. Nothing's changed. Now I know this hearing today is one of your final ones. You've heard a lot from researchers, doctors, and hopefully people like me about what hunger really looks like. But you haven't seen my kids, until today. I hope when you make your recommendations to Congress you think of Asyiah and Tasir, and the millions of kids just like them. And you think of moms like me, sick over the idea their kids might find the same hard life they did. And what I really hope is that you actually listen, and actually do something about it. Because there's no way my family can wait till 2020 for another hearing, another listening session, focused on ideas to end hunger. We need to end hunger. NOW.

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