

**TESTIMONY OF WES RIVERS, POLICY ANALYST  
DC FISCAL POLICY INSTITUTE**

**At the National Commission on Hunger Public Hearing in Washington, DC  
July 14, 2015**

Good afternoon commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Wes Rivers, and I am a Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI is a non-profit organization that promotes opportunity and widespread prosperity for all residents of the District of Columbia through thoughtful policy solutions.

I am here today to testify on the importance of federally funded nutrition programs in helping DC residents stay fed and achieve economic stability. Programs like SNAP and free and reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program fill an important gap in residents' budget, allowing them to pursue work or school and maintain a healthy diet. We believe that the Commission on Hunger should work to increase support and resources for these programs to ensure that people are getting the healthy foods they need throughout the month. However, we also would like to encourage the Commission to address the economic determinants of hunger – such as affordable housing and low-wage jobs in DC.

National nutrition programs are an important tool in helping residents achieve economic security. The SNAP program, for example, serves more than 140,000 residents or 20 percent of the District's population, and it was responsible for lifting 14,000 residents out of poverty during the years after the recession.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, of the 178 schools in the District, 162 schools are currently enrolled in or eligible for free and reduced price lunch through community eligibility.<sup>2</sup> This means that national nutrition programs are having an impact on a large share of our population's health and food security.

These supports are very critical given DC's economic circumstances. DC's economic recovery has benefited some, but has also left many others behind. DC's poverty rate has climbed to 19 percent since the recession. Wages for many workers have stagnated, leaving the typical low income household to survive on \$10,000 a year. As the cost of living in the city continues to increase, national nutrition programs will be key in helping residents maintain stability.

Nutritional supports not only stabilize household budgets; they also support economic mobility and opportunity. In particular, good nutrition is critical to learning and academic achievement for

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<sup>1</sup> Center on Budget And Policy Priorities, District of Columbia Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Fact Sheet, <http://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/DC.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Office of the State Superintendent of Education, DC Schools Eligible for Community Eligibility Provision in School Year 2015-2016. <http://osse.dc.gov/publication/dc-schools-eligible-community-eligibility-provision-sy-2015-2016>

children. For example, WIC has been shown to improve cognitive development in children – increasing skills such as memory and vocabulary.<sup>3</sup> Access to fresh, healthy food and to nutrition education can improve diets of residents, making it more likely that their children will enter schools and training programs ready to learn. Academic achievement, in turn, leads to better economic outcomes such as higher wages as adults.

Given national nutrition programs’ importance to economic opportunity and the large impact it makes in the lives of District residents, we hope the Commission will recommend increases in benefits, especially in SNAP, so that residents can continue to make ends meet in the District. Higher benefit levels will improve District residents’ ability to purchase healthy foods throughout the month and give them flexibility in purchasing healthy and locally sourced options. Higher benefits will help more residents navigate the high costs of living in DC, freeing up money for housing and transportation, and will lift more residents out of poverty.

We also urge the Commission to explore the root causes of hunger. As mentioned before, the District has had stagnant wages among low skill and low wage workers. Over the last decade, average incomes for the poorest 40 percent of DC residents have been flat. Yet rents have increased steadily in a housing market that has catered to an influx of new, higher income residents. Low-cost housing in the private market has virtually disappeared, and as a result, 64 percent of low-income renters spend more than half of their income on rent.

Not surprisingly, when families face high housing costs, they are forced to cut back on other necessities, including food. A study by the Joint Center for Housing Studies showed that low-income families with severe affordable housing cost burdens spent \$160 a month less on food than low-income households that do not face severe housing burdens. They also spent \$28 a month less on healthcare, \$152 less on transportation, and \$51 less on retirement savings. This suggests high housing costs make it even harder for families to get enough nutritious food.<sup>4</sup>

We urge the Commission to look at ways to address economic determinants of hunger in conjunction with improvements to national nutrition programs. DC has already made strides, increasing the minimum wage to \$11.50, putting \$100 million towards affordable housing production, and expanding the state earned income tax credit to be one of the best in the country. Still, there is more that can be done here and in other states, and DCFPI hopes the Commission will explore these types of policy remedies.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.

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3 U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. *The National WIC Evaluation: An Evaluation of the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children*. Vol. 1: Summary. Alexandria, Virginia: U.S. Department Agriculture, 1987.

4 Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, “The State of the Nation’s Housing,” 2011.