

**TESTIMONY BEFORE
THE
NATIONAL HUNGER COMMISSION**

BY

**MARYLAND HUNGER SOLUTIONS
MICHAEL J. WILSON, DIRECTOR**

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Maryland Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger and promoting well-being

My name is Michael J. Wilson, and I am the Director of Maryland Hunger Solutions. Maryland Hunger Solutions is a statewide, non-profit organization dedicated to ending hunger and promoting well-being in Maryland. We have a three pronged strategy to overcome barriers and create self-sustaining connections between Maryland residents and nutritious foods. Maryland Hunger Solutions works with state and community partners to:

- Maximize participation in all federal and state nutrition programs through a combination of removal of obstacles to participation, close work with social service agencies and outreach.
- Educate the public and key stakeholders both to the stark reality of hunger's existence in Maryland and to solutions that are already at hand.
- Improve public policies to end hunger, reduce poverty, and promote nutrition.

Per capita, Maryland is the wealthiest state in the nation. But even in the wealthiest state in the nation, and even in our wealthiest counties, there is hunger and there is food insecurity. According to the USDA, 16.2% of Maryland residents are food insecure. Nearly 260,000 of Maryland's children live in food insecure households – a condition that makes them more likely to suffer from a host of physical and mental health problems. Approximately 770,000 Maryland residents utilize the Food Supplement Program, which is Maryland's name for the SNAP program.

Today I drove from Baltimore Maryland to Washington, DC specifically to speak at this hearing. Baltimore is less than 40 miles from here, which is about an hour and half in rush hour traffic. But Baltimore is a world away from this hearing. It is a city that is experiencing poverty in all of its manifestations; 84% of the kids in the Baltimore City Public School system qualify for free and reduced meals and 22.7% of Baltimore city residents are food insecure. While 8.5% of Maryland residents live below the poverty level, 22.9% of Baltimore city residents do, as do 37% of Baltimore's children.

298,186 households or 13.3% of Maryland households are food insecure. If those 109,858 are very low food secure, or 4.9% of Maryland households.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics calculates Baltimore's unemployment rate at 8.1%. But that number masks the full dimensions of the challenges we face. For example, for young African American men between the ages of 20 and 24, the unemployment rate is a staggering 37 percent. In the Sandtown-Winchester community where there were riots earlier this year, the unemployment rate is 51.8%. And while unemployment is not an excuse for civil unrest, a lack of economic opportunity is always a tragedy.



However, we are making progress. In June, in part due to legislation enacted at the State level, the Baltimore City Public School system elected to utilize the community eligibility provision. Given the high FARMS rate in the schools (84%) it will reduce paperwork, focus on providing nutritious meals reimbursed by USDA, and eliminate stigma for BCPS students. Being able to know that every BCPS student can get breakfast and lunch for free, is a significant step in addressing hunger.

We are working with Maryland WIC (Women's Infants, and Children) program to modernize as well. Utilizing the electronic benefit system for WIC products will be more efficient and also reduce stigma for the pregnant women and the mothers of young children whom WIC services.

The FSP program – SNAP in Maryland – is an important part of the safety net for Marylanders. It lets low-income residents access benefits at grocery stores, farmers markets, and other retailers, making consumer choices about nutrition in the marketplace. While they have less resources than people without FSP, they are able to supplement what they can feed themselves and their families. Our numerous food banks and pantries provide emergency food all over the state, and we often make referrals to these partners in cases of immediate need. But it is the FSP program that feeds hundreds of thousands of Maryland residents and helps to lift them out of poverty.

In fact, the boost provided by American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) was helpful in three important ways.

- 1) It helped support the economy of thousands of families who were impacted by the Great Recession.
- 2) It helped improve the health of tens of thousands of Maryland families who otherwise would not have been able to purchase the quality or quantity of food their families needed.
- 3) It helped to infuse funds into our local retail economy. None of those SNAP dollars were invested, saved, or offshored. They were spent in Maryland, and our food retailers and their employees were additional beneficiaries.

Maryland has done a credible job utilizing community partners to encourage FSP participation. It is my understanding that only the state of Pennsylvania has more community partners than Maryland, and we are working collegially with our state agency, the Department of Human Resources (DHR), to address barriers, system glitches, and problems faced by program participants. Our monthly meetings give us an opportunity to speak directly to program administrators to address the issues that we see at a community level.

But Maryland has *not* utilized the program to fullest. For example, bureaucratic impediments have prevented long-term unemployed residents from getting FSP information from directly from DHR because our agency that administers unemployment – the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation – has not figured out how to collaborate to within the confines of confidentiality and separate agency missions.

We will continue to work with our partners in the state to address these issues at a state, municipal and county level. What I fear is that some in Congress – or a Commission like this – will make policy decisions or recommendations which will make our work more difficult, and will make the lives of program recipients harsher.

Ideas like split issuance – where low income families have their benefits divided into smaller amounts, or outright benefits reductions – are a real threat.

In my view, there are three things which are needed at this time.

- 1) Increased SNAP benefits. The fact that benefit levels are too low is a contributor to obesity (because of the kinds of foods that limited benefits buy), helps to exacerbate the creation of food deserts, and makes other economic challenges (like housing and education) more difficult.
- 2) Addressing the general economic challenges facing working families with poverty-fighting policies such as raising the minimum wage, universal health care and paid-sick leave.
- 3) Resisting the urge to punish recipients just because we can. Reducing their benefits because of school attendance and prohibiting former felons from receiving benefits is counterproductive. In addition, not coordinating benefit programs forces people to repeatedly apply for similar program in a bureaucratic fashion.

Finally, we held a special dinner in honor of Dr. King's Birthday at Israel Baptist Church in Baltimore in January. Through a grant from one of our Advisory Committee Members, David Clements of the House of David, and the facilities of the church, we were able to feed nearly 200 families. The people whom we fed were homeless, food stamp recipients, or people otherwise experiencing poverty. We believe that one of the best ways to honor Dr. King's legacy is by honoring the least among us. And so we celebrated the holiday by providing a nice meal to folks who don't often get to just have a nice meal.

As part of that event, we did something that we regularly do, which is to ask folks to share their message to policymakers, to put that message on a paper apple, and let them know that we would share that message with those who have the power to impact their lives.

Here are a few of those messages.

- Keep WIC and Free Meals in Schools Intact
- A fed child will have a chance to grow up to be a healthy productive adult
- More jobs and homes and food

- What are you having for dinner tonight? Will it be enough? What about breakfast? Many (hundreds) people (women and children) can not respond to these questions. Help (Please)
- This is a (sic) to End Hunger. There are many people that don't know where the next meal will come from. We as a people have the power to change that. Please help us to keep these program alive. Don't ignore this! We are talking children, women and men of all races. We have the power to do something good. Thank you.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and share these thoughts with you.