

Witnesses to Hunger

Testimony of Witnesses to Hunger

before the
National Commission on Hunger

Washington, DC
July 14, 2015

Distinguished members of the National Commission on Hunger.

Thank you for considering our written testimony. We are the members of Witnesses to Hunger. We live with hunger and poverty on a daily basis. While you may be hearing from researchers and policy experts, we ask you to consider and give priority to our testimony in light of our expertise on the issue given our first hand experiences.

As members of Witnesses to Hunger, we voice, affirm and share the struggles of millions of families throughout the country who experience poverty. As the National Commission on Hunger investigates hunger in America, we urge you to continue speaking to us, and to meaningfully include the millions of Americans like us who experience hunger. In order to address hunger we must be part of the solution because we know the strengths and weaknesses of the way in which hunger is addressed in this country. Today we are here to help you learn from our lived realities.

History of Witnesses

Witnesses to Hunger began in 2008 when we were given cameras and told to take photographs of our communities – what we wanted people to see, what we wanted to see changed, what we think would make a real difference in the lives of our families and our neighbors. It was supposed to be just a research study, but we transformed it into a long-term, highly engaged advocacy and education network of parents organizing for social justice.

In this testimony, we will show you that hunger is more than the absence of food in our bellies. Hunger is all-encompassing. It's woven into the fabric of our being, it's a determinant of our ability to get ahead and break the cycle of poverty. It's not just about food. We are hungry for so much more.

Get Real & Stop the Stereotypes

Many legislators believe the stereotypes of people in poverty. They think they need to decide who is deserving and who is undeserving of help. This way of thinking is flat-out wrong, and is harmful to the future of America.

These stereotypes are also one of the driving forces behind cuts to programs that are more needed than ever. Over the past three years, families receiving SNAP have seen two cuts. The first was a cut to pay for other nutrition programs costing SNAP recipient on average \$29 each



"Come leave your world just for one week and live in my world. Tell me how you're going to make it and survive; how emotionally, you're going to keep yourself together. To day-by-day look at your kids and tell them, 'I don't have any money to take you to the store.' Or, 'We're eating Oodles of Noodles today because the food stamps didn't last.'"

– Erica, Witnesses to Hunger – Philadelphia

month. This gave families less than \$1.40 per person per meal to feed their families. Can you feed your kids and yourself using only \$1.40 each meal? Imagine trying to put together a nutritious, filling meal for \$1.40 per person. The second cut came from the Farm Bill this cut cost some families \$90 a month. Families were forced yet again to do more with so much less.

And these cuts are small potatoes compared to some of the other proposed cuts. A proposed \$40 billion cut to SNAP, which benefits the most marginalized in our society, that feeds children, that responds to the shortcomings of our economy – just proves to us that our government doesn't care about us, the hardworking Americans who need a little extra support. They don't care about our children or our futures. They only care about their bottom

line and sticking to their preconceived notions of what poverty really looks like.

We are looking to you, Commissioners, to take back to Congress a new perspective on poverty in America. And with that, create a national plan to end hunger that is adequately and meaningfully funded while being grounded in realities of hunger.

Focus on our Children

We try to keep the pain of hunger away from our kids. But we can't. They feel it.

Jahzaire is the fourteen-year-old son of Philadelphia Witnesses to Hunger member Angela. Jahzaire has shared publicly about how his mom's sacrifices don't go unnoticed. He said that he sees her not eating so that he and his brother can eat. So when Jahzaire heads to school, he's distracted. His mom is on his mind, not his coursework. Because he's thinking about how his mom is not eating like she should.

It's not just the older children who feel the effects of food insecurity. Take Bobby, son of Emily, a member of Witnesses from Philadelphia. He is lactose intolerant. But he loves his lactose-free milk. When Bobby turned five in May, he was no longer able to



"I'd have to explain to Bobby that he could only get half a gallon of milk; that maybe next month they could get more milk. But how can a five year old accept that? He's a growing boy, and he wants his milk. How can you accept that?" – Emily, Witnesses to Hunger - Philadelphia

receive help from WIC – including the extra help his mom needed to buy his very expensive lactose-free milk. Emily really struggled those five months in between WIC ending and school meals beginning. Having to readjust her monthly budget to make up for the difference from losing WIC often left her with little money for the milk. Emily would tell Bobby that maybe next month they could get more milk.

The children’s awareness of hunger for food is what is most painful to us, and what should be most appalling to our nation.

It’s because of our kids that we know that to prevent hunger, you have to focus on good jobs, accessible and quality food, safe housing, strong education for both children and adults, and freedom from violence.

I. Ensure Good Jobs

Hunger isn’t about lack of food. It’s about not having enough money to buy nutritious food. So to address hunger, you need to address that families simply do not have enough to make ends meet or access to jobs that will truly support us in lifting their families out of poverty.

Our friend Barbie, like so many other low-wage workers, was playing by the rules and working hard but ended up putting her family in a worse position. After looking for a fulltime job for several months, she got stable – and fulfilling – employment. Her wages increased slightly, making her lose benefits so quickly that her family felt the effects of hunger more severely than before. Barbie often recalls getting dinner ready for her kids – often oodles of noodles – and then going into another room herself to look at menus, hoping the visual of delicious food could stop her physical hunger pains. She fed her kids first, trying to buffer them from hunger.

If you work, you should be able to provide for your family. That seems like common sense. But stories like Barbie’s happen all too often in our country. We don’t pay fairly for hard work. We keep people trapped in the cycle of poverty by making people choose between work and keeping food on the table.

We often turn back to a photo that our friend Imani took:



“I was on my way to an overtime job--they had called me to work there for one day. So I was walking past City Hall and thinking to myself, “Well, if I go into work this one extra day, are they going to cut my food stamps off? Was I going to get cut off again?” I really didn’t know what to do. What can the city do to help us stay on the food stamp program when we do extra work? I don’t think it’s fair for us to get reprimanded for doing something positive. That’s why I chose that picture.”
– Imani S, Witnesses to Hunger - Philadelphia

Punishing hard work will get our country nowhere. Tell Congress that the working families on food stamps are just that – working. And we want to keep working until we no longer need food stamps, when we have built our own safety net. But to get to that point, we need support. We need SNAP to stick around long enough to make sure our wage increases are stable and sufficient to buffer us from hunger.

II. Enough Food for an Active, Healthy Life



“With the money food stamps provide, I was able to feed her breakfast that morning. Without it what would she have eaten? I wanted to show that with the help she was able to eat breakfast that morning. She had cereal. She had milk. She didn’t have to go without.” – Crystal, Witnesses to Hunger - Philadelphia

One in five children are hungry – they live in food insecure households that do not have enough food so the child can have an active and healthy life. Half of the 45 million SNAP recipients are children and, like many of the members of Witnesses, 60% of households with children work while receiving SNAP.

We know how important nutrition programs are to families. Take a look to the left at a photograph Crystal, a mother from Philadelphia, took. Because of SNAP, Crystal was able to feed her daughter. The nutrition programs currently in place fill a real need in millions of households.

But SNAP alone is not enough. Crystal may have cereal and milk at the beginning of the month when she receives her SNAP allotment but for many members of Witnesses the food purchased quickly runs out. We cut coupons, buy things on sale, and shop around but the benefits still only last two or three weeks. We have to make choices based on the cost of the food and how much it will fill our children’s bellies instead of the nutritional quality of what we purchase.

Our kids need to eat every day and if we can buy oodles of noodles that will last the week that will always win over fruits and veggies that may be eaten within a day or two. For us to be healthy we need better options and more affordable food or the SNAP allotment must be increased.

III. Safe and Affordable Housing for Families

When you’re homeless, food insecurity is nearly inevitable. You’re hopping from couch to couch, living in a hotel – you have no stable kitchen, no safe place to sit and have a nutritious meal.

Juell, a member of Witnesses from Boston, experienced this struggle last winter. All the snow brought frigid temperatures and leaks into her home; her landlord refused to do anything about it. Juell and her two daughters had to move out and stay in a hotel for three

months. Her youngest daughter, Prayer, suffers from severe food allergies, so getting the food she needs and being able to cook it safely proved a challenge while being homeless.

Hunger and housing go hand-in-hand. When designing policies and programs to address one issue, you must consider the other.

IV. **Emphasis on strong education at every stage of life**

Ensuring that all children receive free or reduced-priced meals at school is necessary to improve students' performance both in and out of the classroom. But also remember that hunger is a 365-day reality for many families. Improved summer meal programs and comprehensive nutrition assistance programs are vital to a nutritional foundation for children to succeed.



"If you're hungry, you got an attitude, right? So it affects the kids too. They learn different things, like they need to know that they can only have one sandwich because the other kids got to have one. It affects them a lot. Sometimes they have bad days and sometimes they have good days. They're not rotten kids. They're trying to learn."
 – Marcella, Witnesses to Hunger - Camden

It's also important that you learn about hunger's effects on adult education. Education is key for a parent to break the cycle of poverty and make it possible for hunger to never be a concern for the family again.

Quanda, a member of Witnesses from Boston, has faced the difficult decision between continuing with her education and following welfare requirements. Just one course away from an Associate's degree in Child Development, Quanda was told by her caseworker she had to stop school in order to maintain her benefits. With threats to that support, she had no choice but to drop out to continue to receive the aid she needs for her two young children.

An important way we can break the cycle of poverty, the cycle of low-wage work, the cycle of hunger, is by getting a good education and establishing a career. But to even have a fighting chance at this opportunity – which could also be considered the American Dream – we need support. We need to be able to take care of our kids. And our kids must have access to the nutrition they need, at every stage of life. But most especially, as they're in school – trying to learn, trying to better themselves, trying to improve their futures.

We must be able to feed both our minds and our bodies.

V. **Freedom from Violence**

We all know what it is like to not feel safe. Whether it's the violence in the streets, on the news, or in our own homes – safety is a hard thing to come by. In our communities we are

concerned about the safety of our children and we know first hand that keeping them safe can be difficult. Walking to the bus stop or a park can put myself and my children in danger. No one should fear leaving their homes but we do every day.

Violence shows itself in many forms. It can be through words. We're all too familiar with the hateful, violent language of racism and bigotry. As kids we remembered the nursery rhyme that told us "words will never hurt me." As adults, we know that's not true. Words strike a blow that leaves permanent scars on us, on our futures. Our friend Whitney from Philadelphia speaks out about this specific type of violence a lot. She recently wrote,

My life as an African American has made it very hard to feel free in this country. From the welfare & housing systems, to the prison and murder rates - our civil rights are violated everyday, and no one is allowed to step up and speak on it. Without being killed, or put to silence.



"Every time he tries to say sorry to me, the only thing I picture is him standing over top of me, choking the life out of me. All I kept saying to him while he was choking me was, "The kids... .. our kids need me... stop...please..." If it wasn't for his friend who came in there and got him up off me, I think I would have been dead." – Anonymous, Witnesses to Hunger - Philadelphia

In our own homes we feel our lives threatened. Verbal, physical, sexual abuse – domestic violence is a dangerous, unfortunate reality for too many of us. Domestic violence has lasting effects on our communities. From the trauma that our children and us experience to the physical and emotional violence affecting our homes. Without access to immediate and meaningful services this violence can seem never ending.

Kim, a member of Witnesses to Hunger from DC, recently spoke about her personal experience with domestic violence. She experienced emotional and physical abuse. Kim even had to miss work due to a black eye missing out on her pay until she healed – at least on the outside. When Kim was pregnant with her third child she had enough and secretly moved. Now as a working single mother of three children Kim struggles to make ends meet.

When there's blood on the streets and violence in the air, and hunger in our bellies we need support and social services and programs that can deal with this challenges in our communities in a comprehensive way. Too often our focus is on surviving – simply making it through each day – and the services that are available are not enough to deal with the difficulties and trauma we face. We want to thrive, we want our children to thrive and that can all start with stable, nutritious, affordable food. A problem that can be fixed and have lasting impacts on our lives.

Recommendations

- 1) Create a national plan to end hunger. Engage the Departments of Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, Education and Health and Human Services, and the general public in crafting a work plan that is fully funded and includes timelines and deliverables so we can hold our country accountable to making this plan succeed.
- 2) Make sure companies and small businesses pay all employees a living wage, and ensure nutrition assistance programs are structured to support parents as they transition into stable work. Parents are the frontline hunger-fighters. But they can only make sure their kids are safe and fed if they have the money to do so.
- 3) Treat food as the basic human right it is, and make sure that nutrition assistance programs respond fully to that need. The current SNAP allotment barely lasts a few weeks and never lasts the entire month. Until our wages are truly living wages assistance programs must make up that difference. The SNAP allotment must be increased from the current thrifty food plan to the low cost food plan.
- 4) Ensure that anti-hunger programs and policies work together with housing policies. Hunger and housing insecurity go hand in hand. If you require nutrition education classes of a parent without a stove, the lessons and benefits of the program are lost, keeping families stuck – in unsafe living environments and in hunger. Programs should access the full range of needs of families before making requirements of them.
- 5) Feed kids 365 days a year. Hunger is a daily problem and we need to ensure that programs that feed our children are accessible and providing nutritious food. Programs like breakfast in the classroom and providing families money on an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card to purchase meals in the summer keep kids healthy.
- 6) Invest in education at every level. We need universal preschool and affordable pathways to college to ensure we are improving America's future and solving hunger.
- 7) Screen all SNAP and WIC applicants for exposure to violence and refer them to the appropriate supportive services. While we understand that caseworkers have a lot on their plates, investing time to fully support applicants will have long-term impacts that help people start to find a path toward self-sufficiency. The Commission should encourage all government entities to work together to provide comprehensive services to victims of domestic violence and their families. The piece-meal approach is not working.
- 8) Continue your engagement with people who have experienced hunger. While we are delighted to offer our written testimony to you for your consideration, we are also eager and willing to review your plan and provide additional support to ensure it is fully funded, contains timelines and deliverables, and reflects the recommendations presented before you today. Please contact Kate Scully at kate.scully@drexel.edu to continue this conversation.

We as members of Witnesses to Hunger are born advocates. We have seen a lot, experienced a lot, and we are brave. We know we must speak out about the injustices we face on a daily basis, living on a limited income and being seen by society as poor and lazy.

Tianna has expressed her request to be heard by Congress many times. After attending the State of the Union Address as the guest of Senator Bob Casey, Tianna reflected on her role as an advocate.

I cannot give up. I need to speak out for my family, my community, my country. The work of Witnesses is difficult. We often read and hear negative, degrading comments about us when we share our stories and our pictures. We often feel the shame that comes with opening up our lives to others. But it is up to us to work tirelessly for change. I want my children to know that I did everything in my power to make sure they have a good life, full of opportunities. And along with my Witnesses to Hunger brothers and sisters, I will not stop advocating until we see real change.

If we work together we can make real change happen. Thank you for considering our testimony.

*For more information about the Witnesses to Hunger program contact
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