

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this morning. My name is Faye Conte, and I am the Advocacy and Education Director at Hunger Free Vermont. We are a statewide outreach and advocacy organization dedicated to ending the injustice of hunger and malnutrition for all Vermonters and work in close collaboration with our partners in New England and around the country. I would first like to thank you all for the good work you are doing as a Commission, and for taking the time to travel around the country and listen to the public about what they see on the ground as millions of Americans struggle to put healthy food on their tables.

Hunger is one of the most universal challenges facing our nation. It appears in nearly every community in the United States, rural and urban. Individuals and families of all shapes and sizes struggle to afford enough food. Access to higher education, owning a home, or even having a job, do not protect you from food insecurity. There is no subset of our population, whether it be children, those who are working, veterans, or the elderly, who are safe from hunger. Today, I would like to take some time to talk about the able-bodied adults without dependents that we have heard so much about today.

Vermont re-implemented the work requirements for ABAWDs in November 2013. Similar to what happened in Maine, the vast majority of ABAWDs lost their food benefits three months later because they were not able to meet the requirements for work, volunteering, or job training. During the first year of re-implementation, I worked very closely with our state agency partners, direct service providers, and the nonprofit organizations called upon to provide volunteer placements. All of these partners were dedicated to providing high quality opportunities for ABAWDs to enroll in so that they may keep the SNAP benefits they so greatly need. What I learned during this time is that it is not as simple as it sounds for an ABAWD to meet these requirements.

The term able-bodied adults without dependents implies that this population is made up of young adults who are simply choosing not to work. This could not be further from the truth. The ABAWD population is made up of individuals who are trying their hardest to get by in a tough economy and who are struggling to find a job. ABAWDs are individuals who may be able-bodied by the federal government's definition, but who face significant barriers to employment. They may lack the education or literacy levels needed to thrive in today's work force. They may be a veteran, they may be homeless and living out of their car, or they may be struggling with an undiagnosed disability. They may be caring for a child or sick parent who is not technically their "dependent". In our rural state of Vermont, two of the largest barriers we see ABAWDs face is a lack of reliable transportation to get to a job, and visible conditions that lack of access to dental and health care have caused that often result in discrimination when seeking employment.

All of these barriers to full-time employment are also barriers to part-time work, volunteer placements, and workforce training. In particular, finding an appropriate volunteer placement is extremely challenging. Nonprofits that we reach out to ask for volunteer placements simply can not find additional placements that meet the hours required. Foodbanks and other organizations that rely so heavily on volunteers are already at capacity as they work with the Department of Corrections and other institutions to provide volunteer placements. These organizations were flooded with ABAWDs seeking volunteer placements. These individuals shared that they have been looking for a job for months,

sometimes years, and they cannot find employment. These organizations, sadly, had to turn many of these ABAWDs away, as they could not provide volunteer placements that were appropriate – that met the skill level, transportation needs, physical ability levels, and more.

I know that you are wary of anecdotes substituting for statistics, but I would like to share a story with you to simply highlight who many of these ABAWDs are. My younger brother is a Veteran of the war in Afghanistan. He served in the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division as a Forward Observer. This was one of the most dangerous positions in this part of Afghanistan in the years he was overseas. Thankfully, he made it home with no serious physical injuries. However, the true cost of his experience has been humbling to him and to our family. In the years since his return, he has struggled with participating in daily life and struggled to hold down a job. He is one of the fortunate Veterans, as my father is able to employ him in his small business and allow him the flexibility he needs for his various VA appointments and the difficult days he often has. He may not be able to hold down a job with a different employer, and if unemployed could fall squarely into the ABAWD category. Unfortunately, many of his friends are not as lucky. They live scattered throughout the country, pay for their groceries with SNAP, and struggle to find steady employment. As the ABAWD work requirements come back into effect throughout the country, many of them will likely lose benefits when they are unable to meet the new work requirements. It is a disservice to these Veterans, who gave so much to our country, to take away their SNAP benefits because they are struggling with daily life after returning from war.

Surviving on SNAP benefits is not easy to do. Anyone who has lived on SNAP, or who has even taken the SNAP Challenge for a week, can tell you that. It does not feel empowering, or even good, to rely on the federal government to put food on your table. The ABAWD population is no different. I encourage the Commission to examine this rule, to really look at the ability for ABAWDs to meet the work requirements, and to determine if this is a rule that is actually helping Americans get back to work and to lift themselves out of poverty in a sustainable way.