

Good afternoon! My name is Courtney Kennedy and I am the Nutrition and Education Manager at Good Shepherd Food Bank. Over the course of my professional career, the issues of hunger and poverty have been present. First, as an educator, I worked to support students who were challenged to be successful, but I never thought to ask if the kids had anything to eat that day. I now look back and realize that that simple question was the root to many of the behaviors and lack of success students were having when so many other safety nets were in place. I struggle with this daily now, as I reflect back on that time, I wish I had the insight to advocate on behalf of students for simple measures such as food. As we are all familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, food and water are the most fundamental needs and the foundation for life. In my current work as the Nutrition and Education Manager, I see the breadth and depth of hunger in Maine, hunger exists in all Zip codes and has no age limits.

Food insecurity and hunger has consequence to our education system, health care system and to our economy. In Maine, 1 in 4 kids face food insecurity, no child should have to worry about when and where they will have their next meal. A hungry student has difficulty getting to school, focusing in school and often has higher rates of behavior issues. If a child is malnourished and lacking nutrition, a child's brain may not develop properly resulting in long term effects on learning. The American Psychological Association found that hunger has psychological effects education; hunger has been observed to cause depression, anxiety and withdrawal which are obstructions of a child trying to focus. Food, specifically nutrient rich, is necessary for children to make the most of formal education. We must address hunger to ensure that we have a future generation of functioning adults. Simply stated if we feed our

children nutritious food they will be more prepared to learn, stay in school, get a job and be self-sufficient, supporting the long-term economy.

Undernourished children and adults are more susceptible to illness including worse general physical and mental health and likely to have chronic diseases like hypertension and diabetes. Hunger and poor nutrition contribute to a number of serious medical conditions including obesity. Increased health issues are linked to increased health care costs and lack of work productivity. Bottom line, the root of many issues related to education, healthcare and the economy are related to the lack of food available to low-income families.

As the Nutrition and Education Manager, I spend much my time supporting the Cooking Matters program in Maine. Cooking Matters offers healthy cooking classes to low-income families, teaching them how to stretch their food dollar in healthy, affordable and delicious ways. For over 20 years, Cooking Matters has empowered families with the skills and knowledge to cook and eat healthy meals on a budget so their children get nutritious foods at home. We target behavior change, providing families with the resources and knowledge to do what most low-income families want to do: provide healthy meals for their children. In a recent study by Share Our Strength, the It's Dinnertime report shares this encouraging statistic: 85% of low-income parents say that eating healthy meals is important to their families but share that the primary barrier to eating healthy is cost. Cooking Matters works to break this barrier by providing cost saving tools and techniques to families to extend their food dollar while making healthy food choices.

I am reminded daily of the impact that Cooking Matters is having on families. When a caregiver of a teen shares that she is thankful for the bag of healthy groceries because she was

not sure how she was going to feed her family that night and thankful that the food is healthy and not processed junk food. When an adult student loses over 30 pounds in six weeks because she cut soda from her diet and made healthy beverage options. When a family is able to extend their SNAP dollars to purchase healthy food to create healthy meals because they have the skills and knowledge to do so when they once struggled with making the meal. What I see when I visit classes is that families want to make healthy food choices, they want to work to ensure that they can provide for their families that they are able to live healthy lives.

In Maine, we cannot do this work without Maine SNAP-Ed who uses the Cooking Matters signature course series and Cooking Matters at the Store tours as part of their deliverables to provide nutrition education to low-income families. Cooking Matters and SNAP-Ed spans generations, reaching kids, teens, young parents, older parents, adults, and the elderly. Without this partnership, the work of GSFb would be concentrated in a smaller geographical area, reaching smaller numbers. In 2010, when GSFb was doing the work we reached 35 families. Last year, in partnership with Maine SNAP-Ed we reached just shy of 4,000 Maine kids, teens and adults. With the help of Maine SNAP-Ed, Cooking Matters is reaching families statewide and having large success with providing essential nutrition and food skills education to families challenged with hunger. SNAP-Ed is key to the fight in ending hunger. Our work to provide a well-rounded course series and impactful education is supported by our local grocery store, Hannaford Supermarkets. Hannaford provides essential funding where GSFb and Maine SNAP-Ed are unable, for groceries both in class and take home groceries where participants get to make a meal at home, reinforcing the lessons learned in class. This unique partnership between a non-profit, with the mission to ending hunger, a government program

focused on providing nutrition education, and a large scale business committed to healthy communities focus allows for collaboration in the fight to end hunger is unique. But, it is clear that the private funding of Good Shepherd Food Bank cannot do this work alone we need the support of SNAP-Ed, Hannaford and a wonderful volunteer pool.

I also see daily the commitment of over 400 volunteers who decide that they want to share their strengths and give back to their communities. Our chef volunteers are some of the most respected in the culinary field and still find time to give back. You may ask why, that is because many of them have struggled financially or have received assistance in the past. But also because they see the impact they are having and the change people are making to better their lives for their children and their community. I think of a chef/wife team who have shared with me that they are involved because at one time they needed the emergency food system and the SNAP benefits received helped them to get back on their feet and now be productive citizens.

As I reflect on hunger in Maine, I think that here is not one real answer to the burning question, how do we end hunger, because there are many complex layers to this issue. If we had a higher minimum wage, if there was no food waste, if communities could address these issues themselves then we would not be having this forum. It is beyond the scope of this topic matter. What I know and is proven is that Cooking Matters is providing essential food, nutrition and financial literacy skills to low-income families with the support of SNAP-Ed. There are people who are making healthy food choices with their SNAP benefits. This would could not be done with the many partnerships that exist in Maine. But I also know that families are

struggling to find adequate paying jobs. Some are losing benefits for earning minimum amounts while their families are facing the realities of hunger.

What recommendations would I make to the commission to ensure Americans have access to sufficient, healthy food?

- Ensure that SNAP-Ed funding is preserved to provide essential nutrition education to low-income families with the skills and knowledge to stretch their food dollar and make healthy food choices to reduce low term health care issues.
- Enact policy changes through Child Nutrition Reauthorization to give states and communities more options to serve summer meals, ensuring kids in rural urban and suburban communities have access to critical nutrition in the summer months.
- For those who work of minimum wage, assure adequate SNAP benefit levels.
- Expand federally funded breakfast and lunch programs to support alternative breakfast models like breakfast in the classroom which have drastically impacts participation rates to ensure all students are able to start their schools days off with proper nutrition.

Thank you for allowing me to speak this afternoon. I am here on behalf of those whose voices are too oppressed to stand up and say that they need help. I am here to help encourage our country's leaders to seek a solution to the fact that there are millions of children are going to bed with empty stomachs in a time and place when food is so abundant, because when a child is hungry, Americans pay the price in terms of lost potential for our communities and our country.