

Members of the National Commission on Hunger:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Shannon McCabe and I am a student at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, majoring in Sociology and Environmental Studies. This summer, I am a fellow at the Maine Hunger Initiative here in Portland.

As I approached my fellowship this summer at the Maine Hunger Initiative, I was excited to be a part of the efforts I am so passionate about: reducing poverty and food insecurity. However, it soon became clear to me that efforts to reduce poverty and hunger are not happening. They're not happening, because the organizations and individuals dedicated to these issues are being forced to play defense right now, rather than offense. Working to help people simply *maintain* their benefits in the current political climate is a full time job for organizations like MHI.

We are spending our time preventing legislation, like those proposing food choice restrictions or splitting SNAP, from passing. Rather than lifting people out of poverty, we are trying simply to keep life manageable for those living in it--and even that is an uphill battle.

The very fact that this Commission was formed, and that you are all here today, gives me hope as I look towards the future.

I ask that you seriously and sincerely consider the impacts of what your recommendations to Congress could mean for our country's next generation. As you know very well, a generation with so many hungry children means a generation of kids that are distracted from learning, lower in stamina, and have impaired mental and physical development. Put simply, hungry children cannot learn as capably as their well-nourished peers.

In a time when the conversation in our country revolves around inequality and its effects, it is crucial that we even the playing field, especially when it comes to the basic human right of access to food. Reliable access to food is not a privilege for those who can afford it. Preventing people's access to food is not a way to cut costs or to further restrict the lives of those living in poverty. And it is most certainly not a way to motivate people out of poverty.

No one wants to feed their families with chips and soda, but when that's the cheapest available food that will keep their children full the longest, that's a hard choice that some people have to make. Furthermore, SNAP purchasing patterns mirror that of the average American. To restrict only SNAP recipients is just another way of shaming the poor.

The USDA agrees that incentivizing healthy choices and making these choices more affordable is a far better alternative to imposing additional food restrictions for SNAP. A comprehensive study of the potential impact of such restrictions conducted by the Illinois Public Health Association supports USDA's opinion. This study asked and answered perhaps the most important question related to this approach—would the proposed restriction have the desired effect of reducing consumption of sugar sweetened beverages? These researchers found that such a restriction would have limited impact on these purchases for two reasons. First, SNAP recipients spend both SNAP and out of pocket dollars to make grocery purchases, thus wages or other cash would likely be substituted for SNAP to make these purchases. Second, and most importantly, they determined that there is a population wide lack of understanding of the health harms of these products. Given that overconsumption of these products are not limited to SNAP recipients, but are a society-wide problem, a universal approach would be a far more effective approach to curb these purchases.

Making it harder to buy less nutritious food doesn't make it easier to purchase fresh produce.

Rather than restricting food choices, we should expand people's ability to buy healthy food. Recently in Maine, we received a FINI grant to increase access to fruits and vegetables for the food insecure at farmers' markets across the state, while also supporting small and mid-sized farmers.

The FINI grant, as a federally funded nutrition incentive program, is a major game changer not only because it's the first of its kind but also because of the volume of funding and the connections it allows among states and the nation. The incentive funds are allowing families to use their EBT cards to purchase twice as many fruits and vegetables from their local farmers markets. For every dollar spent on produce, they earn a dollar to spend on produce. This incentive is bringing more federal dollars into our state and directly to our dedicated farmers.

This model can be spread to farmers' markets in other states as well as to traditional grocery stores. Providing people with more money that can be spent only on produce promotes healthy choices without increasing restrictions.

Food choice restrictions, work requirements, and funding SNAP through a block grant are all examples of taking two steps back in the fight against poverty.

I am hopeful that by the time I join the workforce, we will be able, once again, to take steps forward. Today, we can do that by recommending that Congress:

- continues SNAP as an entitlement program
- mandate that states eligible for a geographic waiver apply for it
- increase the minimum wage
- expand the 1 for 1 SNAP incentive for purchasing produce

Thank you for your time and attention, and I look forward to hearing the outcomes of this Commission.