

July 30, 2015

Dr. Mariana Chilton, Co-chair
Robert Doar, Co-chair
National Commission on Hunger

Dr. Chilton, Mr. Doar, members of the National Commission on Hunger:

My name is Thomas Ptacek, I am a veteran and a former recipient of the SNAP program. And I can assure you, I never thought I would be. Prior to spending a year at the Oxford Street Shelter, here in Portland, I didn't know the first thing about social service programs, except for who I thought they were for and that wasn't me, I had never even filed for unemployment in my life.

But, even without addiction issues or serious mental health issues I found myself in a situation that just a few years before, was unimaginable. To explain what it's like to be homeless for a year is difficult, but it involves words like anxiety, depression, fear and hopelessness.

During my year of homelessness I experienced a disconnection with the world around me that left me capable of clearly defining the word "vulnerable". My physical health was the worst it's ever been (I gained close to 100 lbs.). My mental health was the worst it's ever been (Depressed and hopeless is not the foundation for success). I've used the word "hopeless" a couple times, let me be clear about this, when I was in the Navy, I worked on an inpatient psychiatric ward. The only thing I didn't really understand wasn't psychosis or the intricacies of personality disorders, it was this idea that someone could be "completely" without hope. Sadness to the point of attempting suicide, got it, "hope-less-ness", just couldn't really imagine that was the proper word. It is, I understand it now. Even with mental health treatment, you don't just bounce back. Without that treatment, it is a long, arduous road at best.

It was not a quick and easy road back for me and the SNAP program was a big part of my success in returning to a more fulfilling life. To me, the most beneficial aspect of the SNAP program is that it allows for choice in the purchase of food that can be prepared in the home. I would like to go beyond nutrition and talk about what this really means and just what it is that the SNAP program provides that soup kitchens and food pantries cannot.

This extra piece, that I personally benefited from greatly, is the sense of normalcy and stability that comes from going to the grocery store and choosing your food. Waiting in a soup kitchen line isn't normal, going to a food pantry doesn't feel stable.

When I first got out of Oxford Street Shelter, it was through a VASH voucher. I was very grateful to be back in a place of my own, I didn't dare ask for anything else, so I continued to go to soup kitchens and food pantries. Consequently, I continued to feel "less than" and "stuck".

When I finally applied for SNAP, it was because I was ready and looking to move my life forward. Having that very important aspect of my life stabilized, allowed me to let go of that "daily crisis" and focus on other aspects of my life. It may sound strange to you, but going to the grocery store, planning and then preparing a meal gave me a sense of peace and accomplishment each day.

For the first several months, I was still getting healthy. Spending a year in the shelter leaves you more than a little unsure of yourself. My confidence and self-esteem took a big hit. At this point I was still very overwhelmed, each day still brought on anxiety, confusion and yes, hopelessness.

It's worth noting, at this point; with long term stayer initiatives and housing first programs gaining more and more support on the federal level, all services that people rely on in their struggle to rise above poverty are going to have to make adjustments in how their services are administered in order to meet the actual needs and not serve as a deterrent to an individual's progress.

Because I was fortunate enough to have my SNAP benefit for long enough, it carried me through to a place where I was comfortable and could move forward without the fear of winding back up in the shelter. To this day, over 5 years removed from my homelessness, not a single day goes by that the thought and anxiety of how devastating it would be to return to homelessness doesn't enter my mind.

The steps in my return to full time employment and self-sustainability that the SNAP program played a major part in were: (a) The stabilization and control of a very important aspect of life. (b) The success of (a) led to the confidence and self worth to venture back into employment, even if initially on a part time basis. (c) The success of (b) led to my recognition of the need for some mental health care. Through that I found the ability to invest in myself, one major way I did this was through my diet. Gone was all the sugar, salt and corn products of processed foods. I was able to figure out that gluten and soy were things I should stay away from. Over a year later, these things are still never found in my cupboards or fridge. Obviously, this would have been impossible without the choice and control provided by the SNAP program. And finally, (d) A return to full time employment, done in a manner where I could ensure the right job at the right time and reduce the anxiety around returning to the shelter.

Today, I don't get a SNAP benefit, I'm over income. But I remember right up to the very end, even though I was a few years removed from my time at the Oxford Street Shelter, I would still have moments where I would open the freezer, even though I didn't need anything right then, just to look in it. It made me feel good, to see my food in my freezer. No matter what else was going on, I knew, could visually verify, that I was going to be able to eat. To be affected like this, years removed from my stay at the shelter, shows what an important part, food security plays in a person's life.

So, SNAP is not just about food, it's about allowing someone to feel normal and stable. SNAP is an investment in a human being. Several years ago that investment was made in me. Now that investment is paying off. My job which involves a fair amount of travel, requires a good reliable car. So I went to a local dealer and bought a car. I register that car, insure that car and put gas in that car. I don't even want to know how much of my money has gone to TARGET because I quite literally got to a point where I had nothing. The car alone, if viewed as a capital expenditure, puts the SNAP program in the black concerning the investment in me. However you look at it, I'm putting money into the economy, and I can assure you, this would not be happening if that investment was not made in me.

If I had to make a recommendation to this commission, it would be simple, do what achieves your desired goal. Don't do what makes realizing that goal improbable. If you ask yourself, what is the best, most efficient way to ensure that those living in poverty have enough food and the system through which they obtain this food does not serve to keep them in poverty or in any way, block their path out of poverty, the answer is obvious, A healthy, robust, accessible SNAP program.