

July 31, 2015

Kate Maehr, Executive Director and CEO
Greater Chicago Food Depository

To the National Commission on Hunger
3040 East Cornwallis Road
Post Office Box 1294
Research Triangle Park, NC
27709-2194



Dear Members of the Commission:

My name is Kate Maehr and I am the Executive Director and CEO of the Greater Chicago Food Depository. I am honored to represent agencies that respond daily to hunger across our community. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony.

The Food Depository is a member of Feeding America's food bank network that covers every county in the United States. In our service area of Cook County, Illinois, we serve more than 812,100 people through 650 food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters and other programs.

The Food Depository has been in operation since 1979 and many of our partner agencies have served the community for decades. When the Food Depository started, we were intended to be a hub where donated food could be collected and distributed to community hunger-relief programs. We were meant to be an emergency response and a supplement for Chicagoans who struggled to access food. Over the decades, we have grown into something much greater.

Every day, the Greater Chicago Food Depository sources and distributes more than 200,000 pounds of food. Last year, our total output reached 69 million pounds. This marks a 50 percent increase since 2008 when we distributed 46 million pounds. We do this with the generosity of food donors and financial supporters from all sectors, including our nation's largest food companies, retailers, farmers, corporate funders and tens of thousands of generous individuals. USDA commodities from TEFAP and CSFP are also a critical source of food for our network and we are thankful for the TEFAP increase in the 2014 Farm Bill.

Beyond distributing food through our network of local agencies, the Food Depository has developed special programs to reach food insecure children, seniors and veterans. We engage in SNAP outreach to help connect eligible households. And, because we know that a good job is often the best solution to food insecurity, we have workforce development initiatives.

At the Greater Chicago Food Depository, we have Chicago's Community Kitchens. This program offers free 14-week job training to unemployed adults who are passionate about starting a new career in foodservice. Since this program was founded in 1998, more than 1,200 men and women have graduated and gone on to successful careers.

Still, for thousands of low-income households in our community with working adults, and those who are unable to work – every day is a struggle to put food on the table. In 2014, Feeding America released its quadrennial *Hunger in America* study, which captures detailed information about who is in need of emergency food assistance throughout our nation. The report for the Food Depository's service area found that 1 in 6 of our neighbors receives food from our network. Of the households we serve, 36 percent include at least one child, 39 percent include a senior and 18 percent include someone who has served in the United States Armed Forces.

Hunger in America also shed more light on the health consequences of food insecurity and the difficult choices our clients make every day. Sixty-two percent of clients have chosen between paying for food and paying for medical bills, 73 percent have chosen between paying for food or paying for home utilities, 59 percent have chosen between paying for food or paying their rent or mortgage. Sixty percent of client households include someone with high blood pressure and 35 percent include someone with diabetes. The results of *Hunger in America* are a sobering reminder that an incredible need persists across our community.

This is why food banks advocate for the future of strong nutrition programs and this is why we write you today. While we strive to be greater, our goal is not to be larger. Our goal is to end hunger in our communities. We know that achieving that goal requires a strong and coordinated response from private charity and public programs. We are proud of our daily impact on hunger, but it pales in comparison to the tremendous job done by federal nutrition programs including SNAP, WIC, CACFP, SFSP, and School Lunch and Breakfast. This is why we strive to connect people in need with these critical programs.

When the Great Recession hit, the demand for food assistance increased dramatically. In Cook County, Illinois, our network experienced a 70 percent increase in food pantry visits over five years. Each week, volunteers in community food pantries, church basement soup kitchens and meal programs saw more and more families walk through their doors for the first time, many of them saying, "I never thought I would be here."

While the record need has leveled off in many communities, it has not receded. Food banks are incredibly proud that we have risen to meet this need. We are proud of the thousands of generous donors and selfless volunteers who embody the American value of service. We are proud of the men and women who operate our partner agencies – most of whom are also volunteers. Together, we have responded to a record demand for food assistance. Together, we have kept millions of our neighbors from going hungry. But charity didn't do this alone. We will never be able to do this alone.

During this era of increased need, federal nutrition programs – especially SNAP – have done exactly what they were created to do. SNAP is the front-line defense against hunger in the United States. When our country experienced its most drastic economic crisis since the Great Depression, SNAP grew to meet the need. SNAP continues to protect millions of children, seniors, veterans, people with disabilities and working families from hunger. But as SNAP expanded over the last decade, so have misconceptions about the program.

In 2013, 43 percent of SNAP recipients lived in a household with a working adult. At the same time, 82 percent of SNAP benefits went to households that include children, seniors or people with disabilities. Approximately eight percent of military veterans receive SNAP benefits.

The average monthly SNAP benefit for an individual last year was \$125.37. That comes out to a little more than \$31 per week or \$1.40 per meal. Every September, during Hunger Action Month, we encourage food bank supporters, partners and elected officials to take the SNAP Challenge and eat for one week on a SNAP budget. While this experience cannot duplicate the real life struggle of a food insecure person, it opens your eyes of the sacrifices, trade-offs and difficult choices made by families on SNAP.

Furthermore, SNAP gives people the opportunity to create a better future for themselves and their families. As many graduates of our workforce development program can attest, SNAP gives unemployed people the ability to provide for their family while they receive job training.

Every day, the SNAP program and food banks work in tandem to prevent millions of Americans from going hungry. Among households served by food bank programs, 55 percent also receive SNAP, but their benefits often run out before the month ends. And for families struggling with food insecurity who don't meet SNAP eligibility guidelines, food banks are there. Together, we have done a fantastic job during historically challenging times. But the need is still there, and if SNAP funding was to be cut further, or if unnecessary restrictions were placed on the program, food banks and pantries could never cover the difference. To put this in perspective, the eight

food banks that serve Illinois distribute enough food for approximately 100 million meals each year, while SNAP benefits in Illinois can provide 1.3 billion meals per year.

This summer, hunger-relief in Illinois took a tremendous step forward when a state bill to expand SNAP eligibility by raising gross income limits was signed into law. This legislation, which moved through the Illinois Capitol with bipartisan support, will relieve pressure on a community-based food pantry system that works tirelessly to keep up with the need. At the same time, it will help 40,000 working families put food on their tables – opening more doors for health and opportunity. When implemented in 2016, this policy change will show the positive ripple effect that federal nutrition programs make for our communities.

Together we have the ability to end hunger in the United States. Every day, food banks like the Greater Chicago Food Depository strive to do more for our communities. We strive to offer more job training, expand programs for veterans, provide more fresh produce in food deserts and ensure that every child is fed during the summer. But we can only do this because federal nutrition programs are the front line defense against hunger and our role is supplementary.

We understand and appreciate the difficult task our elected officials have to balance the budget. But the budget should not be balanced on the backs of our most vulnerable neighbors. For many low-income families, the recession isn't over. Unfortunately, a return to employment isn't always a return to food security. Both public and private programs that provide a helping hand in hard times are critical.

On behalf of the Greater Chicago Food Depository, Feeding America, our partner agencies and the people we serve, I thank you this opportunity to submit testimony. I encourage you to provide recommendations that will protect and strengthen the impact of SNAP, TEFAP and critical nutrition programs for children and seniors. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kate Maehr", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kate Maehr

Executive Director and CEO
Greater Chicago Food Depository