



August 5, 2015

Dear Commissioners,

On behalf of the Northeast region, Project Bread would like to thank you for taking the time to come to Portland, ME, in order to learn more about hunger and how it affects those in New England.

We read with interest the mission stated on the National Commission on Hunger's website regarding the commission's goal, in part, to "reduce need for government nutrition assistance programs, while protecting the safety net for the most vulnerable members of society." While we agree that **ideally** government nutrition assistance programs might be minimized, we believe that this is not a reality given the well-documented needs of so many people – the elderly, disabled, children, and veterans. It is also difficult to see how nutrition assistance can reasonably be reduced while so many Americans are not earning a living wage.

When the head of a household works full-time, he or she should earn enough money to pay the rent and put food on the table. As the *Boston Globe* stated in a November 2014 article, "[t]he poverty rate in Massachusetts is the highest it's been since 1960. The inflation-adjusted wages of the lowest-paid workers haven't budged in decades. Income inequality in the state has become greater than in the nation as a whole." The stark reality is that no matter how hard they work, thousands of families in Massachusetts cannot reliably protect themselves from hunger, and until we can provide a living wage for all, safety nets such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are critical to providing for the most vulnerable members of society.

To those struggling with food insecurity, SNAP benefits are critical to survival and well-being, and those receiving benefits are more likely than not incompatible with stereotypes of federal assistance program recipients. For example, veterans, elderly, children, and disabled adults are all extremely vulnerable populations who rely heavily on government assistance programs. In Massachusetts, close to 61% of participating SNAP households are families with children under the age of 18, almost 42% of SNAP households have an elder or disabled member, and almost 32% of all SNAP participants are in a working household. Project Bread's FoodSource Hotline counselors and SNAP enrollment coordinators hear from these individuals constantly, and their stories are often painful reminders of just how important federal nutrition programs are.

A mother of three recently stationed at Hanscom Air Force Base called seeking assistance with food. Her active-duty spouse was deployed overseas shortly after they moved to the state, and now, essentially a single parent, her already difficult job search had become nearly impossible.

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Already worried about her husband, and needing to tend to children recently uprooted and missing their father, things had become overwhelming. -The hotline provided them with multiple resources to help during this difficult time.

C.H. is a veteran who applied for SNAP in the beginning of December 2014 and was given expedited benefits because he was virtually homeless and had no income.- He recently was able to get a bed at a local shelter. C.H. now has SNAP benefits that help him buy food as he struggles to find a job.

E.N. was laid off from her job after working as a lab technician for nearly 10 years. She is a single mother and her only source of income is now the unemployment compensation she receives. For nearly an entire year, SNAP has helped her to make ends meet as she tries to find a job that can also cover the cost of childcare.

Additionally, SNAP benefits also help those who find themselves unexpectedly involved in a financially difficult situation. In the majority of non-working households and households with no income, the wage-earner has either been recently laid off and are waiting for unemployment, or their unemployment has recently ended.

A man in his 20s called Project Bread's FoodSource Hotline looking to see if he was eligible for SNAP. He had been a carpenter for many years, but recently suffered a work-related injury that effectively ended his career in carpentry. He was receiving some worker's compensation, but it was far from enough to cover his bills. He felt trapped because he needed job training to be able to find employment in a different field, but needed to spend his time finding work so he could survive.

A married couple, the owners of a small store on Cape Cod, called the FoodSource Hotline because their business was failing. While never making them "rich," their business had provided them with a comfortable lifestyle and enabled them to give back to their community as well. However, their business had recently begun to rapidly decline, to the point that they had begun paying their employees' salaries with their personal credit cards. They were eligible for SNAP, and the counselor asked them if they would like information about community food resources. Their response was a not an uncommon one: they had been long-term volunteers at the town's food pantry so they already had the information.

These are just a few examples of the stories behind able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs)—a particularly vulnerable population. They have higher rates of unemployment, poverty and food insecurity, and are often the poorest of the poor. They do not qualify for any other assistance, have temporary or low-hours jobs, and often don't qualify for Medicaid in some states. This describes the majority of the homeless population. Because of these immense struggles this population faces, we strongly suggest allowing flexibility on the current three-month time limit for ABAWDs when jobs and volunteer opportunities are scarce and when a request for disability designation is pending.

Federal nutrition assistance programs are critical to the health and well-being of millions of U.S. citizens. Individuals and families on SNAP benefits are healthier. They have access to healthy food that would otherwise be unobtainable; they have additional funds for utilities, prescription drugs, and other medical expenses; and they are less anxious about where their next meal is coming from. Additionally, there's a significant economic upside to the SNAP program. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), \$1 of SNAP benefits generates \$1.70 in economic activity in Massachusetts, and SNAP benefits pumped about \$1.3 billion into the Commonwealth's economy in 2014. SNAP kept 86,000 people out of poverty from 2009-2012. All of these benefits come with a program in which the average monthly benefit per person per meal is \$1.36.



Furthermore, as an entitlement program, SNAP is able to help people out in real time. When the economy is sluggish, participation rises; when the economy improves, SNAP numbers decline. Were SNAP a discretionary program, there would not be adequate resources for the program at times of highest need. In fact, the number of SNAP participants has already started to fall. According to the CBPP, after seeing significant increases in SNAP participation during the Great Recession, participation is beginning to decline. In total, 1.5 million fewer people participated in SNAP in November 2014 than at peak participation in December 2012.

In addition to SNAP benefits, federal nutrition programs such as the School Breakfast and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provide the safety net and critical nutrition that low-income children need to learn and grow. The introduction of USDA's revised nutrition standards for school meals ensure that children receive the healthiest food possible during the academic year and hopefully develop lifelong positive eating behaviors. School meals have a significant impact on the nutritional lives of all children, especially low-income students who often eat both breakfast and lunch at school. In January 2012, USDA released a final rule outlining the changes to reimbursable school meals. The rule emphasizes whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products, with limits on sodium, saturated fat, trans fats, and calories.

Project Bread strongly supports maintaining these high nutritional standards for school meals. School meals that meet the school meal standards specifically created by USDA to promote child health can be a boost to the health and well-being of all schoolchildren. But two other factors really count: the meal must be cooked and served within budget and, most importantly, the schoolchildren must like it and eat it. It is food in the stomach, not food on the plate, which counts.

Project Bread's Chefs in Schools program is a cost-effective and proven model that can be replicated. Project Bread is a pioneer in training school food service staff to cook meals that meet the high standards set by the USDA, are prepared within the public reimbursement rate, and, most importantly, are offered in an appealing way that students will eat them.

Launched in Boston in 2006, Chefs in Schools has since expanded to 59 schools in 6 communities serving over 42,000 students. Project Bread has been engaged with the Harvard School of Public Health for a decade developing and evaluating this model. Most recently, Project Bread completed a four-year comprehensive pilot project demonstrating the efficacy of Chefs in Schools. Our work has been evaluated in three journal articles that were published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, *the American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, and *the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. The findings, which focus on the measurable outcomes of chef trainings, plate waste tools, and behavioral economics, demonstrate that healthy food can be offered within the federal reimbursable meal budget and that, when prepared and presented in an appealing way, children will eat it.

The most recent study—cited numerous times by the USDA and other advocates trying to prevent the rollback of the USDA's progressive school meal requirements, which are grounded in recommendations from the Institute of Medicine—found that after 7 months of our chef intervention, students in "Chef schools" were 20 percent more likely than control school students to choose a fruit and 30 percent more likely to choose a vegetable, and their consumption of these foods increased by similar percentages. Massachusetts is the first state in the nation to make healthy school food a matter of statewide public policy, thanks to the support of the legislature and governor.



Despite the importance and success of these programs, there is still an unmet need. Just in the last two years, participation has increased in Massachusetts by 22,700 students participating in School Breakfast programs and 6,000 children participating in summer food service programs. As cited in a report presented to the state legislature by Project Bread, the two-year investment in outreach has resulted in a 16.1% increase in student participation in School Breakfast programs and 137,000 more meals being served to children at 96 additional Summer Food sites in low-income communities.

According to the Project Bread's 2013 Status Report on Hunger in Massachusetts, 11.4% of Massachusetts households experience food insecurity and the health consequences that go along with it. During the school year, many families stretch their food budget by applying for free or reduced-price school meals for their children. Frequently, these families find it difficult to absorb the additional meal costs when school is not in session. Their children may be at risk for hunger and malnutrition, putting them at a disadvantage when they return to school in September. By providing free, nutritious meals throughout the summer, the SFSP ensures that every child has access to the food they need in order to return to school ready to learn.

We ask that you examine federal nutrition programs at a holistic level and realize that they are absolutely essential. Thank you again for your time, and we look forward to the Commission's findings.

Sincerely,

Connie Rizoli
Director of Public Policy

ADDENDUM

TESTIMONY TO NATIONAL COMMISSION ON HUNGER

Submitted via webpage

Connie Rizoli

Project Bread's Chefs in Schools (CIS) program trains school food service staff to cook meals that meet the standards set by the USDA, are prepared within the public reimbursement rate, and, most importantly, are offered in an appealing way that students will eat them. Project Bread has collaborated with the Harvard School of Public Health for a decade developing and evaluating this model. The findings show that healthy food can be offered within the federal reimbursable meal budget and that when prepared and presented in an appealing way children will eat it. The most recent study found that after 7 months, students in Chef schools were 20% more likely to choose a fruit and 30% more likely to choose a vegetable, and their consumption of these foods increased by similar percentages. MA is the first state to make healthy school food a matter of statewide public policy, thanks to the support of the legislature and governor.

