

**Testimony to the National Commission on Hunger
El Paso, Texas
June 26, 2015**

Good Afternoon, I am Laurie Biscoe, Deputy Director for the Texas Workforce Commission's Workforce Division. We are honored that the Texas Workforce Commission has been invited to provide testimony and to be a part of this Commission's work.

From a personal experience, I have been very blessed to have never experienced a lack of food or true hunger. However, as a young person, my family experienced periods of low income and unemployment. Looking back on those times, I recognize that my parents obviously made the provision of food one of the highest priorities. We didn't go without food, but we did go without items that were determined to be less critical. My experience is not unlike that of many families.

Working in the workforce system, our mission and purpose is to ensure that we understand the skills and education needed by individuals to qualify for and obtain jobs that employers are looking to fill. Having stable employment is a critical factor in providing a family, including providing nourishing meals for children and parents so that they are able to perform well in school and in employment.

TWC provides integrated workforce services and is dedicated to developing a skilled workforce in Texas. TWC is part of a system, composed of ourselves and coupled with 28 Local Workforce Development Boards (Boards), that provides services to job seekers and employers throughout the state. To talk about efforts at the local level, you have Janet Bono from our local Board that serves the El Paso area to visit with you this afternoon, as well.

The workforce system is based on many partnerships – between businesses, human service organizations, economic development entities, community-based organizations, and others with an interest in workforce development. These partnerships, through the 28 boards, assist with defining the local employment opportunities that are in demand and the education and training needed for those jobs. Providing connections with those jobs and the training and education needed to qualify for those jobs allows Workforce Solutions customers to see their path to self-sufficiency.

As I noted previously, TWC administers, in an integrated fashion, multiple workforce, education, and training programs. While services may be provided by multiple programs concurrently, I am going to focus my comments on the Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T).

(Also administered by TWC - the Workforce Investment Act (WIA); Choices, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) employment program; Child Care for low income families, and others with a variety of work activities that lead to permanent, unsubsidized employment).

In Texas, the SNAP Program is administered as a partnership between 2 state agencies. The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) determines eligibility for SNAP benefits, as well as determining whether individuals are able to work. Those determinations are electronically transmitted to TWC on a regular basis.

TWC, through its partnership with workforce Boards and their local offices, administers the SNAP Employment and Training program, providing services and assistance to SNAP recipients to prepare and find employment that will allow for transitioning from SNAP benefits, and possibly other types of assistance, to financial independence.

Both agencies share information regularly and facilitate effective communication by:

- Providing consistent messages to SNAP recipients regarding the importance of finding employment; and
- Better identifying and mitigating barriers to finding and retaining employment.

Local Workforce Solutions Office staff outreach and provide services to SNAP recipients who are determined to be able to work. The services that are provided include:

- First, assessing the participant's strengths and employment goals and jointly developing an employment plan based on the participant's needs and the available community resources.

An important part of the employment planning process is the availability of labor market information about the types of jobs available in region, those that are projected to grow in the future, and the educational requirements for jobs – both entry level and within the career pathway.

The employment plan may include activities such as:

- job search, using the state's job matching system, WorkInTexas.com
- job readiness activities, including resume development and interviewing skills practice
- workfare (or community service) for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs); or work experience and
- support services, as necessary.

Those support services may include items such as:

- Transportation
- Child care
- Clothing necessary to work
- GED preparation and payment

I'd like to take a minute to highlight that TWC administers the subsidized child care program. Quality child care is a critical support for many low income families in order to be able to work. Making a connection with the workforce system may be the first awareness by a parent of this valuable resource for families. Child care assistance may make the difference needed to be able to effectively search for, obtain, and retain employment.

In addition, local workforce offices have established connections with local community resources that provide temporary assistance with needs such as food. However, our system's ultimate goal is to position individuals with employment and an understanding of a career pathway that will enable providing food, transportation, housing, and other necessary supports for their families on a long term basis.

In administering the SNAP E&T program, Texas takes a Work First approach, which means that emphasis is placed on activities that provide all SNAP recipients quick exposure to the local labor market. Oftentimes, what an individual is missing in being a viable job candidate is experience... employment helps to put SNAP participants on a path to greater self-sufficiency.

Texas is very proud of the work we do with SNAP E&T customers and the outcomes we see for the individuals that are outreached and engage with the workforce system to find employment.

We currently serve approximately 48,000 individuals per year. While the number seems significant on its own, the reality is that the SNAP E&T funding is only sufficient to provide E&T services to a small portion of the approximately 700,000 eligible SNAP recipients. While we outreach and are available to serve all Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents, we currently are able to outreach and offer services to only about 5% of the non- ABAWD eligible population.

The employment rate for individuals who participate in SNAP E&T statewide in Texas is currently a little over 80 percent.

During the current year, Texas received approximately \$5 million more in funding than received in prior years. This additional funding has allowed Texas to provide SNAP E&T services to all Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) and to expand service delivery to the non-ABAWD SNAP population.

The additional funding provided an opportunity for local workforce staff to connect with their local community partners, such as food banks, to expand service delivery. The ultimate funding amount for FY 2016 is uncertain, but we are expecting that it may likely decrease in the coming year.

Knowing that may be the case, the Workforce Commission is currently considering dedicating a portion of its SNAP funding to implement an initiative focused on strengthening partnerships with local Food Banks in workforce development areas. As mentioned earlier, food bank partnerships currently exist in many areas as a community resource and a workfare/work experience location for SNAP E&T participants.

As part of the initiative, funds will be dedicated to building capacity for assisting in educating/training local food bank staff and volunteers about the workforce services available in the local area. Workforce solutions office staff, under the initiative, would be available to provide:

- information about SNAP E&T and other workforce services;
- training on the use of WIT.com; and

- scheduling appointments to begin participation in the SNAP E&T program.

We are hoping that expanding Board and Food Bank partnerships to promote SNAP E&T and other workforce services will allow for providing awareness of and actual service delivery to more of the SNAP recipient population than we currently have the resources to serve through the SNAP E&T program.

As for recommendations, based on the success we have seen in working with individuals to find employment, we recommend that discussions regarding alleviating hunger include consideration and a connection to the delivery of workforce services.

Thank you!