

Thank you for your work on the commission and for taking the time to listen to our thoughts on hunger and food insecurity.

My name is Delene Perley. In retirement I voluntarily coordinate a food pantry, Project FEED, here in Portland, Maine. As well I volunteer at the Preble Street Soup Kitchen monthly.

A number of ideas come to mind as I contemplate this problem.

First, I'm reminded of the many people who come to our pantry because of medical problems they have had. How do medical problems lead them to ask for food? They had jobs, but were unable to work because of their medical issue, lost their job and health insurance, many lost their homes and certainly any savings they had. They are renting or living with friends or relatives. Getting help with food allows them to use whatever money they now have for heat, rent, gas for the car.

I keep thinking: what if we had something like Medicare for everyone, a universal healthcare, then medical costs would not wipe out a person's finances. This doesn't happen in other first world countries!

Others who come to us have disabilities or have mental health issues. Our son has Asperger's syndrome, a form of high functioning autism. Through dogged efforts on my husband's part, he has SSDI (Social Security Disability) and therefore Medicare even though he is in his 40's. Although he has a college degree, he cannot interview appropriately for a job. But with a caseworker assisting him, he has a part time job. With our help obtaining housing for him, he is financially independent. How many of our pantry clients have similar resources to assist them? We need more people employed to provide job finding and job coaching assistance and transportation services for these capable "in need of a hand-up" people.

That universal medical insurance about which I spoke? It should include mental health assistance as well. It is clear to me as I assist people at the pantry that many could never hold a job as they have trouble deciding even if they prefer peaches or pears, peas or corn. Dental coverage is needed too. People have told me not to give them anything to chew because they have no teeth. We have also been asked for pop-top cans, because people have no can openers.

Some of the people who come to the pantry are waiting for their SNAP benefits to start -- \$122 a month for food. Have you tried to buy healthy groceries for a month for that amount of money? Just the other day I was at the farmers' market and one beet was \$1.25. A wonderful young man at the University of New England made a recipe book for healthy meals for one month limiting his spending to SNAP benefits. There are a lot of rice and beans in that recipe book. However, widely distributing that book would be a great idea. It is now only available to folks on-line!

We get grants for the pantry so that we can get fresh farm produce during the summer from one of the local farms. It is a wonderful thing but the winter does not bring such bounty. We are back to canned veggies and soups from Save a Lot or food rescue. Winter farm produce grants and availability is another suggestion.

Some of our clients are working but finding it difficult to afford to feed their families. Income disparity in this country is a crime. We are asked for specific proposals. Job coaches, transportation, recipe book printing and distribution, can openers and winter farm produce grants are the small things. Universal healthcare, a living wage for workers and policies that do something about income inequality are what is really needed.

Soup kitchens, food pantries, SNAP benefits, general assistance, food rescue efforts by wonderful organizations like Wayside – these are but bandages and stop-gap measures. We need a country that believes that everyone should have a chance for a life with a living wage, affordable housing and medical care.

I have a graph that illustrates how the United States compares with other countries in income growth over the years from 1975, interestingly when our pantry began, to 2007. The parallel growth in the need is incredibly striking. I don't have figures going back 40 years, but I can tell you that in the last 20 years, the need at the pantry has quadrupled. We need more than another garden plot or food drive, we need to do something about an economic system that is choking a good segment of our society.

Your task is huge and I don't envy you the work you have ahead of you. Thank you for listening.

Delene Perley
Project FEED
202 Woodfords St.
Portland ME 04103
projectfeed@hotmail.com

Personal contact information:
15 Middle Street, Unit 302
Portland ME 04101
207 805 1089
deleneperley@gmail.com

3 In some countries, one fifth or more of total income growth was captured by the top 1%

Share of income growth going to income groups from 1975 to 2007

