

Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Opportunities for Growth: Michigan and the 2012 Farm Bill

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Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, and Senator Roberts, for the opportunity to talk with you today about hunger and the critical importance of nutrition assistance in Michigan.

I'm Eric Davis, Director of United Way for Southeastern Michigan's Food Initiative. At United Way, our mission is to mobilize the caring power of Detroit and Southeastern Michigan to improve communities and individual lives in measurable and lasting ways. We focus all of our resources and efforts on three things: Education, Income and Basic Needs. In the category of Basic Needs, we are intensely focused on one issue that poses the greatest threat to the health and safety of people in our communities: hunger.

Today I'd like to share with you how the problem of hunger is affecting people in Southeast Michigan, what United Way and our partners are doing about it, and how innovative, community-based efforts that promote access to nutrition assistance are critical to closing the gap.

Hunger is all to common in Southeastern Michigan

Too many people and families in our region can't afford enough food, and so they face difficult choices. Gas or dinner. Winter coat or groceries. School supplies or breakfast. Medications or meals.

While families in Southeastern Michigan are struggling to keep a family home or find a job, they too often struggle with the additional burden of hunger. Even for those that are employed, hunger can have a negative impact on their productivity, as they often skip meals to ensure their children have enough to eat.

Here in Michigan, hunger increased sharply in 2007, when the economic crisis hit. It has continued to rise since then, and currently almost 1 in 5 Michigan residents have trouble affording enough food.

Today, 18.5 percent of people in the Detroit Metro Area struggle with hunger. More than 700,000 residents of Southeastern Michigan depend on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for food each month. Over 300,000 of those are children.

Since 2004, the number of Michiganders counting on SNAP, or food stamps, to feed their families increased by 66 percent — from just over one million to almost 1.7 million people, many of whom are children and seniors. We expect unprecedented amounts of people to continue to rely on food stamps until unemployment rates have decreased significantly.

Families with children are the hardest hit by hunger. While this is a crisis in itself, it becomes more troubling when you consider that children experiencing hunger have lower math scores and are more likely to repeat a grade. They are more likely to be absent and tardy, and to have behavioral issues and attention problems. Teens experiencing hunger are more likely to be suspended from school, and have difficulty getting along with their classmates. And mothers who lack access to affordable, nutritious food give birth to more low-birthweight infants. These proven effects of hunger are also known predictors of negative life outcomes, including high school dropout, low IQ, lower lifetime earnings.

Major public health concerns, like obesity, are linked to hunger; and individuals that struggle to afford enough food are significantly more vulnerable to this disease. There are many reasons that hunger and obesity co-exist. Affordable foods tend to have more calories and fewer essential nutrients. Healthy options are even further out of reach when the majority of nearby food outlets are fast food restaurants and liquor stores. In addition, individuals who face hunger may engage in cycles of deprivation and overeating. They face unique and severe stressors due to financial problems, and often lack safe, appealing opportunities for physical activity.

Innovative solutions from our community

United Way for Southeastern Michigan is proud to be part of a committed, dynamic and inclusive community of advocates for food security, fresh food, nutrition education, and a sustainable food economy. I'd like to share with you just a few of the innovative initiatives to create better outcomes for our region by leveraging local assets in combination with federal nutrition assistance programs.

United Way for Southeastern Michigan is one of many proud supporters of the Fair Food Network's "Double Up Food Bucks" program, which doubles the buying power of SNAP dollars when they're used to buy Michigan-grown produce at farmers markets. Last summer our support empowered 5,600 households to make healthy, nutritious choices with their SNAP funds - and their dollars flowed directly to small farmers and their rural communities.

In partnership with Gleaners Community Food Bank, United Way has committed to establishing more "Client Choice" food pantries in metro Detroit. Pantries that use this best-practice model offer expansive aisles with a variety of foods, including fresh produce, which is selected by clients in order to affirm their dignity, promote healthy choices, and reduce food waste. More importantly, they serve as community hubs, taking an active role in fighting poverty by helping their clients to access benefits and other supports.

Detroit FRESH works to supply corner stores with local, fresh, and affordable produce so that community members can have access to healthy foods at their local convenience stores. Detroit FRESH is a project of a Wayne State University group, SEED Wayne, in collaboration with Capuchin Soup Kitchen.

The Michigan Benefits Access Initiative

One lesson from our work in the community is that greater access to benefits positively impacts all of us. Michigan loses almost \$1 billion annually in unutilized federal benefits. Increasing SNAP participation would bring those funds to Michigan, where they would provide a valuable boost to the economy as they flow through local businesses. Moreover, advocates for the poor can attest that benefits like SNAP, which help to ensure a family's basic sufficiency, allow us to focus on achieving long-term goals, like education and financial stability.

United Way for Southeastern Michigan is deeply invested in the Michigan Benefits Access Initiative, a community-based outreach initiative that utilizes web-based technology to register individuals for all available government benefits. MBAI is a collaborative effort by more than 50 partners statewide - including state and federal government agencies, businesses, and nonprofits. Our partnership was inspired by the unprecedented numbers of Michigan households who qualify for public benefits, while both the State of Michigan and nonprofits struggle to meet the growing needs.

MBAI will use an online tool developed and operated by the Michigan Department of Human Services, called MiBridges, to streamline multiple benefit applications. Currently, MiBridges allows applicants to apply for SNAP and LiHEAP funds using one integrated application. It is currently being expanded to integrate other benefit applications as well.

This best-practice, "one-stop" method for connecting families to benefits is coupled with an outreach program that utilizes the resources of community organizations around the state. The outreach portion is an essential leg of MBAI, designed to help the MiBridges tool "meet people where they are" through a dedicated network of community-based organizations whose staff will also be trained to assist those eligible within their communities in successfully applying for benefits.

The initiative is multifaceted in order to address the several barriers to benefit enrollment, including lack of information about how and where to apply, the time required to enroll in programs, complicated paperwork, childcare or transportation issues, distrust of government, and stigma associated with using public benefits. Families that are struggling with hunger for the first time due to the recent economic crisis often lack familiarity with assistance programs; using established community organizations and modern technology are crucial to successfully reaching these and other populations.

Conclusion

The simple truth is: SNAP helps buffer families against hunger, improves diets, and enhances child health and academic success. Our work highlights important opportunities to create better access to affordable, nutritious food. We encourage the committee to maintain SNAP to meet the needs of Southeastern Michigan, Michigan, and the United States. We also support innovative federal programs that leverage community resources to help all families access the benefits for which they are eligible.

Finally, we encourage the federal government to focus on strengthening the safety net in local communities by supporting cross-sector efforts to modernize and streamline access, such as the Michigan Benefits Access Initiative.

Chairwoman Stabenow, I'd like to thank you for your strong record of advocacy on behalf of children of our state, and issues like poverty and hunger that impact children and families. I urge you and your fellow Senators of this committee to protect funding for SNAP, and to support hungry children and families in accessing available benefits, as you focus on the upcoming reauthorization of the Farm Bill.

Thank You.