

U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee Hearing:
The Role of Federal Food Assistance Programs in
Family Economic Security and Nutrition
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Testimony from Robert Dostis, MS, RD
Executive Director of the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Harkin, Senator Chambliss, and members of the Committee for this opportunity to address the fundamental role of the Food Stamp Program as the cornerstone of nutritional health for this country's most vulnerable children, families, and elderly citizens. Thank you for your past diligence in maintaining the integrity of the Food Stamp Program and your continued support for improving access to nutrition resources. As a Vermonter I would like express my deepest gratitude to our senior Senator, Patrick Leahy, for his long-standing commitment to economic equality, and the strengthening of vital federal nutrition programs.

My mission today is two-fold: to share with you how the Food Stamp Program, the single most effective nutrition assistance program, is making a difference in families and communities. I am also here to share that by strengthening the program, the disturbing trend of increased hunger in America can be addressed. On behalf of hundreds of anti-hunger organizations across the country affiliated with our national counterpart, the Food Research and Action Center, I would like to submit, for the record, a letter urging the strongest possible nutrition title for the 2007 Farm Bill. This letter has been signed by over 100 Vermont organizations, as well as hundreds of partners nationwide.

I speak to you today as the executive director of a statewide anti-hunger organization that provides information, training and resources to service providers working on the frontlines to help Vermonters meet their basic needs for housing, heat, transportation, and food.

I also speak to you as a registered dietitian and nutrition educator who sees how hunger and the poor diets that result from the inability to purchase fresh, nutritious foods affect the health and well-being of too many Americans. Limited access to nutritious foods increase rates of obesity, compromise health, and promote chronic disease. As a state legislator, I recognize the burden that this growing epidemic places on our state in the form of increased health care costs, reduced educational efficacy, and the loss of economic capital in the form human potential. Despite being considered one of the healthiest states in the nation, the direct medical costs associated with obesity in Vermont alone exceed \$140 million per year, burdening other federal programs - such as Medicaid. Nationally, this figure is \$75 billion and continues to grow. .

Background

Hunger, hidden for most Americans, is real and disturbingly close to home. Despite talk of a robust economy and low unemployment, hunger has been steadily increasing over the past

decade in Vermont as evidenced by statistical trends, increases in food shelf caseloads and stories from advocates on the frontline.

Data released by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey reported that 11.5 percent of Vermonters lived below the federal poverty level, an increase of 2.5 percent between 2004 and 2005 - the third highest percent increase in the nation. During this same year, Vermont experienced the largest percent increase in childhood poverty, rising from 11.7 percent, to 15.4 percent. Most frightening however Vermont experienced the biggest percent increase in the number of children suffering from the most severe form of hunger over the first five years of this decade.

The 2007 federal poverty threshold for a family of four is \$20,000. The Joint Fiscal Office of the Vermont Legislature estimates, however, that a family of this size, including two children, needs a minimum annual income of \$48,000 simply to meet their basic needs. This is assuming that they have employer assisted health care coverage, no child care costs, are not saving anything for unexpected expenses. At Vermont's new minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, a household with two full-time working adults would expect to earn \$31,325 -- only 75% of the state's bare bones basic needs budget. In the past 5 years the average rent for a two bedroom apartment has increased 56%. In 2005, 49% of Vermont renters paid more than 30% of their income for housing

Many families find themselves in a constant struggle to make ends meet because they simply do not earn enough to cover basic necessities. Faced with difficult economic decisions, a family's nutritional needs are often the first to suffer.

How do families cope when their budget fails to cover the cost of shelter, heat, clothing, health care, child care, and transportation --- let alone the unexpected car repair, infected tooth or plumbing problem? Time and time again, we hear from families, that "when money is tight, food is paid for last."

Facing empty cupboards, parents do anything they can to ensure that their children are fed. Common coping strategies include parents and older children reducing their portions, skipping meals, borrowing food from family or neighbors, using credit cards, or purchasing cheap, nutritionally inadequate food that fill bellies but fail to provide nutrients. An increasing number of households are relying on emergency food assistance to feed their families. Vermont's food pantry caseload has increased by 23% in the past two years. Since many food shelves have limited hours, irregular supplies, few volunteers and restrictions on frequency of visits, accessing this emergency assistance often proves quite challenging.

While demand at food pantries is increasing, supplies are down. Last Friday's New York Times reported that Second Harvest, the national network of food banks, experienced a 9% drop in donations nationwide in 2006. The article also featured a Long Island minister who was asking people to donate their unwanted holiday fruitcakes, Whitman's Samplers, and Girl Scout Cookies as a way to replenish the bare shelves of the church's food pantry during January, a month when donations of food are often the lowest. Given the obesity epidemic and the health costs of poor diets, we cannot afford to allow this to be the way that our children and elders are "nourished".

The fact that families are finding it more difficult to feed their children was illustrated during a recent phone call from a public health nutritionist in rural Addison County. She is very worried that in the past year she has seen a tripling in the number of underweight toddlers who failed to gain any weight in the 6 months between visits. This is particularly concerning as children in this age group are at the most critical stage of brain development, where a lack of proper nutrients can have long term affects on their physical, behavioral and cognitive development.

Adverse Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity for Children

The devastating effects of hunger on children are indisputable. Where there is hunger, there is under-nutrition. And where there is under-nutrition, there are children who have a compromised ability to develop in physically, cognitively, and emotionally healthy ways. There is a wealth of research from which similar conclusion have been drawn.

According to the Center on Hunger and Poverty at Brandeis University, children living with food insecurity suffer from poorer overall health and a compromised ability to resist illness compared to their food secure counterparts. These children suffer more frequent illnesses and infections. There is evidence that children in food insecure homes are hospitalized at a 30% greater rate than food secure children of the same income.

Not only do children living with food insecurity suffer from compromised health, but they are at an increased risk for developmental delays, and behavioral and emotional problems, such as increased aggression, hyperactivity, anxiety and social withdrawal. Children with empty bellies are not ready to learn. They suffer academically, experiencing impaired cognitive function, lower test scores, poorer overall school achievement and increased school absences, tardiness and suspension. Children suffering from food insecurity are twelve times more likely to be aggressive and seven time more likely to steal, than children with similar incomes who are food secure . Children with empty bellies are not ready to learn. A wealth of studies have shown that children in homes where food is scare cannot take advantage of educational opportunities.

There is, perhaps, a more insidious side of hunger, which is often neglected from scientific analysis--its emotional cost. It is more difficult to quantify; it is more difficult to explain. But as someone who grew up poor in the housing projects of New York City, I know how painful it is to be hungry and how devastating it is to be a child who doesn't know where their next meal is going to come from. Looking back, what stands out is the shame and the isolation: I can remember spending lunch time at school walking alone along the tall playground fence, so no one would notice that I hadn't brought a lunch from home, and didn't have money for the lunch line.

In a country founded upon freedom, equality and justice, we have the responsibility to ensure that each child has access to safe, fresh, nutritious foods without having to suffer the humiliation and social isolation that has so often resulted from being singled out as "low-income."

Importance of Food Stamps

The Food Stamp Program is the nation's first line of defense against hunger, enabling recipients

to provide their families with fresh, nutritious foods despite challenging economic circumstances. It is the largest anti-hunger program in country, increasing food security for over 26 million Americans. The program increases the buying power of over 18,000 families with children in the state of Vermont and more than 13 million nationwide - over 80% of food stamps benefits go to households with children . Recently, much attention has been paid to the Food Stamp Program's ability to provide disaster related food assistance, a topic that will be addressed in the testimony of others. However, I would like to highlight the fact that this Committee has consistently protected the entitlement structure of the Food Stamp Program, allowing food assistance to be immediately available to those families adversely affected by economic disasters, such as the two recent plant closings in the town of Middlebury. Currently, over 48,000 Vermonters use food stamps to buy groceries each month, generating an estimated \$80 million in economic activity that can be used to support our local businesses and farmers. As a direct result of the outreach efforts of a statewide coalition, food stamp participation has increased by 28% in Vermont since 2001.

Not only do food stamp benefits increase food security and help stimulate Vermont's economy, but they also improve children's health. While studies have shown that food insecure children have twice the risk of poor health, food stamps reduce this risk by 50% .

The Food Stamp Program is also a critical component of the fight against obesity. Although obesity affects Americans across the socioeconomic spectrum, families with limited resources are uniquely vulnerable to this threat . At present, poor diet and lack of physical activity is currently the second leading cause of death in the United States though it may soon surpass tobacco as the number one killer. Since studies have demonstrated that 80% of obese teenagers grow into obese adults, it is imperative that we address the threat of obesity early in a child's life. Initiatives like the Food Stamp Program provide children exposure and access to healthy foods while they are young so that they can keep eating healthily in adulthood. A recent study found that school age girls who participated in the Food Stamp Program, School Breakfast, and School Lunch had a 70% reduction in risk of being overweight compared to peers of similar income who did not participate in these programs .

Food Security and Performance in School

Food security directly correlates with improved behavior and school performance. Students who are food secure perform better in school, have fewer behavioral problems and are less likely to engage in aggressive or hyperactive behaviors.

The Food Stamp Program is unique because it provides benefits to families that are consistent, reliable and dignified. Families can count on food stamps each month, working them into an often tight monthly budget. Purchasing groceries on an EBT card prevents recipients from being singled out from any other shopper using a debit or credit card. Households also have the power to choose foods that are culturally appropriate and attentive to particular dietary needs. The choice component of food stamps is particularly important in Vermont with our expanding refugee and immigrant populations. Studies show that these communities are twice as likely to be poor as U.S. citizens, making them particularly vulnerable to food insecurity . Food Stamp allotments allow them the autonomy to purchase culturally appropriate foods for their family that they may not otherwise be able to acquire at a food shelf or soup kitchen.

Time and time again, food insecure Vermonters have expressed their desire to provide their children with healthy, nutritious food such as fresh fruits and whole grains - some of the most expensive products sold in supermarkets. This is uniquely challenging in a rural state like Vermont where higher than average transportation costs are passed to consumers through increased food prices. Without food stamps, many families in Vermont could not afford these foods.

The voices that we hear each day in our work as anti-hunger advocates continue to reinforce the vital role that food stamps play as a nutrition resource for so many families facing difficult economic circumstances. I would like to share with you just a few of these stories.

A homeless shelter advocate remarked that "Families are referred to us when they are at risk of being evicted because they are behind on their rent. The first thing we do is to sit down with them to review their budget. If we find that they are not getting food stamps, we help them to apply for this program. Sometimes, this extra amount of money available for food frees up just enough of their income to give them the little edge they need to keep their apartment."

As I was drafting this testimony, one of our college student interns shared with me her personal experience with the Food Stamp Program. She and her mother were on food stamps for quite some time during her childhood. She remembers that "they ate much better when they were on food stamps. When they were receiving benefits, their meals included fresh vegetables and whole grains; when they were not on the program, they ate macaroni & cheese." She also reflected on her relationship with her mother - "that it was much better when they were on the program, because there was less stress in the house."

A nurse at Addison County Home Health, told us about a family of five that she recently worked with. She says:

"Dad works a 10 hour day as a milker on a dairy farm. He makes a minimal wage, and they live in tenant housing. Money is tight. When their twin babies were born pre-term, they had frequent doctor visits, and there was a lot of financial pressure. The family was reluctant to seek food assistance but as the home health nurse, I convinced them to try food stamps, at least to help them get them through the first year. If not for the Food Stamp Program, I'm sure this family would be eating very meagerly. With food stamps, Mom shops smart; and makes every meal stretch. She cooks chili, big pans of lasagna, and uses her crock-pot; this mom is feeding her family really well. "

From our conversations with direct service providers, we know that food stamp recipients understand the dynamics of a healthy diet, but may have limited opportunity to acquire the skills to cook nutritious foods for their families. We are committed to utilizing food stamp nutrition education dollars to expand our Cooking for Life Program - a six week series of classes, providing hundreds of families with hands-on learning and the skills to shop smarter and cook nutritious meals on a tight budget. Without monthly food stamp benefits, however, many of these families would not be able to afford the necessary ingredients to practice these new skills.

Improvements to the Food Stamp Program:

Despite the enormous success of the Food Stamp Program, this vital part of the nutrition safety net is still dramatically underutilized, capturing only 60% of eligible Vermonters. As anti-hunger advocates we work tirelessly to reduce barriers to participation, correct misconceptions about the program and educate low-income Vermonters about eligibility. Many obstacles to participation still remain including thousands of households who are unaware of their eligibility. Likewise many Vermonters are reluctant to ask for help, have difficulty finding transportation to the food stamp office, or do not feel that their benefit allotment justifies wages lost or time spent applying.

In order to win the fight against hunger, it is imperative that we explore ways to strengthen the Food Stamp Program so that it is a resource that is in reach for all hungry families.

As a dietitian, I am familiar with the components that make up a healthy diet. However, I also am aware of the precarious balance between stretching your food budget and purchasing the foods with the most health benefits for your family. As I have illustrated already, limited resources require families to purchase inexpensive foods that are sustaining: typically foods high in fat and starch. The USDA recently published new dietary guidelines that promote more fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and whole grains which can be some of the most expensive items in the grocery store. For families struggling to make ends meet and still put food on the table, these dietary guidelines do not translate into economic reality. The average food stamp benefit in Vermont of \$.92 per meal, per person, is not sufficient to ensure the health and well-being of families on food stamps. In addition the \$10 minimum benefit has less than half the buying power than it did when it was first set 30 years ago.

The USDA has established a set of budgetary guidelines entitled the Thrifty Food Plan. This plan outlines the minimum amount of money a family needs to spend on groceries in order to feed their family a healthy diet - approximately \$4.37 per meal. In order to assess the feasibility of these guidelines my staff at The Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger undertook a study of their own to see how well a family on the Thrifty Food Plan would be eating.

Notwithstanding the fact that many rural Vermonters do not live in close proximity to a major grocery store or that many simply cannot get to one at all, we sent nutrition students from the University of Vermont to purchase food for a hypothetical family at a local major grocery store providing them with maximum variety and price comparison. They devised two daily menus: one menu based on the Thrifty Food Plan and one that increased the per meal cost to \$9.28 called the Liberal Food Plan. When the two menus were compared, the Thrifty Food Plan menu had 900 more calories than the Liberal Food Plan and twice the amount of sodium recommended by the USDA. The lower cost plan was also deficient in many critical nutrients including Vitamin B, Folate, Iron, and Vitamin D.

An all too familiar illustration of this problem is the story of a local family - the father is a senior and has a common health problem: high blood pressure. To stretch their low food stamp benefit they buy bologna, canned vegetables and soups which are cheap and high in sodium. A healthy diet could help to address his health issues, but these fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are just not affordable.

Many families face a conflict, forced to decide between receiving food stamp benefits and

establishing financial security. We hear stories of food insecure families losing their food stamp benefits because, in their efforts to save for a car, an apartment, or simply have an emergency fund, they exceed the \$2,000 resource limit.

A caseworker from the Burlington based Committee on Temporary Shelter shared with us that they often work with homeless adults in their 50s who have special dietary needs and health issues, such as heart trouble, Type 2 Diabetes, and high blood pressure. Food stamps allow such individuals to access the foods they need to stabilize their health. Simultaneously, they are struggling to address their housing issues. In an effort to save up enough money for a month's rent and a security deposit, they lose their eligibility for the Food Stamp Program.

Conclusion

As Chair of Vermont's House Natural Resources and Energy Committee, I can appreciate the pressures this Committee faces in balancing resources for commodities, conservation, energy, and other titles of the Farm Bill. A strengthened Food Stamp Program will have a far reaching effect--beyond lowering incidences of obesity and nutrition related illnesses; beyond helping curb the rising cost of health care; beyond improving the cognitive development and education of children; beyond bolstering local economies and agriculture as families increase their consumption of fruits, vegetables, protein, and whole grain. A strengthened Food Stamp Program is a sound investment in our future and will help steer the course for the health and well-being of all Americans.