

Educating children, strengthening families, building community

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Luanne Francis and I represent Kingsley House, a social service agency that works to educate children, strengthen families and build communities in Southeast Louisiana and has been doing so for over 100 years. Kingsley House opened the first Resettlement and Recovery Center in New Orleans 6 weeks after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the gulf coast. Since then, Kingsley House has served over 6,000 individuals providing child care, case management, respite, mental health services, Medicaid and Food Stamp enrollment among other services.

I welcome the opportunity to appear before you today to speak about the role that Federal Food Assistance Programs play in Family Economic Security and Nutrition. In particular, I will speak about the role that the Food Stamp and Disaster Food Stamp Programs have played and continue to play in the lives of Louisiana Families. It is my hope that after this hearing you will understand even more why the 2007 Farm Bill is an opportunity for many more families across America to be lifted out of hunger and to have the resources they need to recover when disaster strikes.

We have all heard and seen the pictures of devastation suffered by gulf coast families in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I have lived it and continue to live it today. On August 29, 2005 -two days before pay day- many families did not have disposable income to prepare for a hurricane. For those families that received food stamp benefits at that time, resources were insufficient to purchase extra to have in case of an emergency. In fact many of our families were not only food insecure, but economically insecure- they did not have enough to meet basic needs and enough reserves to be protected against unexpected financial crises.

Today, seventeen months after hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coast, families are still struggling with the resettlement and recovery process. Today the fair market rent for a 2 bedroom apartment in New Orleans is \$978 per month an increase of 45 percent since before hurricane Katrina. (1) The median cost for child care is \$85 per week. (2) Louisiana families earning median income will spend 13 percent of that on child care for one child compared to the national standard of 7 percent. (2) The median income for a New Orleans household in 2000 was approximately \$27,000. (3) When the cost of transportation, insurance and other household costs are factored into the equation, there is little left to buy food for the family. If you are like the Thompsons- a family of four- who lost their home in the storm including vital documents such as birth certificates, and driver's license, the cost for replacement of these items for a family of four can run upwards of \$75. This represents an added financial cost for

families trying to resettle. The struggles with insurance companies if you were a home owner or with contractors while renting somewhere else so that you can work and be a part of rebuilding the city is a heavy burden. Emergency food banks fill some of the gaps but these become sources of regular food supply for many families and operate with major food shortages and thus they cannot support the widespread needs of persons affected by disaster.

Since June 2006, the Kingsley House Walkers/Talkers have enrolled over 500 individuals in the food stamp program resulting in over \$33,000 in benefits. The Walkers/Talkers have also assisted these individuals with securing replacement vital documents so that they could complete the application process to have access to healthy food. Food Stamp benefits to a family of four that has a rent of \$978 and child care costs between \$ 300 and \$400 per month help a family stay healthy, have some level of security and not faced with the decision of whether to stop working so that they do not have to pay child care costs so that there is money to buy food. Food Stamps help to ensure families that their basic need for food can be met while attending to other basic survival needs.

At the community level, Food stamps contribute to the local economy by contributing to retailers' revenue. In Houma, Louisiana one supermarket chain reported a 35 percent increase in sales due to food stamp usage. (4) The Disaster Food Stamp Program made it easy for families to get food in a time when there were no answers and a lot of uncertainty. The broader rules and relaxed verification requirements helped families not normally eligible for benefits able to get food assistance during financially difficult times and helped supplement benefits for those that were already receiving food stamps. Seventeen months after hurricane Katrina, this is still the case. Families still have no answers and providing documents to complete an application when there is limited supporting infrastructure is challenging.

I remain firm in my opinion that not only Louisiana families but families and communities across the country will benefit from a 2007 Farm Bill that has a strong nutrition title.

I urge you to invest significant new resources to make food stamp benefit allotments sufficient to real world needs, to extend eligibility to more vulnerable populations and to connect more eligible people with benefits. I urge you to improve on the progress made in the 2002 Farm Bill by revising resource rules so that families need not forfeit the opportunity to save in order to participate in the Food Stamp Program. Allowing families that suffer unemployment, part time work, illness or other financial emergencies to access food stamp benefits without exhausting their resources will help those families rebound and promote their self sufficiency long-term. The increased dollars would reap benefits in child development and health, school achievement, a more productive work force and greater economic security for all families.

#### Reference:

- (1) Fair Market Rent available at [www.gnocdc.org](http://www.gnocdc.org)
- (2) Family, Friend, Neighbor Care: Strengthening a Critical Resource to Help Young children Succeed available at [www.agendaforchildren.org](http://www.agendaforchildren.org)
- (3) Orleans Parish Income and Poverty available at [www.gnocdc.org](http://www.gnocdc.org)

(4) An Advocate's Guide to the Disaster Food Stamp Program available at [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org)