

Written Testimony Before the  
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
Wednesday, January 31, 2007

"The Role of Federal Food Assistance Programs  
in Family Economic Security and Nutrition"

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am Frank Kubik, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) Manager at Focus: HOPE, a civil and human rights nonprofit organization in Detroit, Michigan. I am also president of the National Commodity Supplemental Food Program Association. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of Focus: HOPE and its 41,000 monthly participants in the metropolitan Detroit area, as well nearly 500,000 monthly CSFP participants in 32 states, the District of Columbia, and two Indian Tribal Organizations.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program began in 1969 to supplement protein, calcium, iron, and vitamins A and C for low-income mothers and children. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) purchases nutrient-rich foods at wholesale prices to provide a nutritionally balanced monthly food package. Pilot programs in 1983 added seniors as eligible participants. Today fully 91 percent of all CSFP participants are seniors.

I have been involved with Focus: HOPE's Commodity Supplemental Food Program since 1981. We distribute 650 tons of food annually to more than 41,000 pregnant and post partum mothers, children under age 6, as well as senior citizens, who participate each month. In fact, 83 percent of our food recipients are senior citizens. Because so many of our senior citizens are homebound, we enlist the support of caring volunteers to deliver food directly to seniors. We partner with various volunteer agencies and individual volunteers to distribute the commodities to those who are unable to shop for themselves at our four primary distribution centers. This type of community outreach allows seniors to maintain their independence and a healthier lifestyle, thus lowering their need for assisted living and increased medical care.

I have seen firsthand that the dilemma many people, particularly the elderly, find themselves in today. Low-income seniors living on fixed incomes are facing an increasingly difficult time making their limited resources stretch to meet all of their daily needs, particularly with regard to getting enough food to eat. They are making daily choices between whether to eat, buy medication, or pay their utility bills, because their severely limited monthly income does not allow them to adequately provide for themselves. The average income for a senior on our program is under \$600 a month. Many of these individuals worked long and productive lives as cooks, maids, janitors, and other low wage workers, but did not have employers who paid into the social security system on their behalf. Six hundred dollars does not stretch very far when you consider the ever-rising prices of food, medications, and home heating costs. To compound this, there are only two chain supermarkets located within Detroit, resulting in extremely limited access to affordable and nutritious food options in the inner city. This trend is replicated across the country in other urban and rural areas. As a consequence, the CSFP plays

a significant role in the daily lives of its clients.

Leonard and Theresa are both in their 80's and are receiving commodities through Focus: HOPE. Leonard worked in a small machine shop for 38 years. Unfortunately, the pension that he was supposed to receive after he retired was discontinued due to the company going out of business. Leonard and his wife are now living on their monthly social security payment of \$822. Leonard's vision is so poor that he can no longer drive a car and Theresa has physical problems that do not allow her to drive. When Leonard is asked why he doesn't apply for public assistance to help him make ends meet when the money from social security runs out, he replies that he is unable to fill out the forms that are needed to register because his vision isn't that good. Moreover, the low amount of assistance that they would receive isn't worth the cost of paying someone to drive them to the office and then finding and paying someone else to take them shopping. There are only small corner stores and gas stations that sell some food products within walking distance of Leonard's house. This isn't much of a choice, given the few dollars that Leonard and his wife have left for food each month. Leonard depends on the kindness of neighbors to take him on some errands without charging him and is grateful for the food that he receives each month from Focus: HOPE. Leonard and Theresa don't have much and they don't ask for much. His eyes tear up when he talks about the condition that he and his wife are in. He worked hard all of his life and did everything the right way. How did things end up so wrong?

At Focus: HOPE, we work with over 300 volunteer agencies and thousands of individual volunteers to distribute the monthly nutritional commodity packages to those who are unable to pick up food from our distribution sites. Further, local courts will often require minor nonviolent offenders to engage in community service hours. Because of its reputation and trust in the community, Focus: HOPE is able to use these individuals to pack and deliver the CSFP commodities to homebound seniors. Many of the participants who receive their commodities this way are unable to leave their homes because of a lack of transportation or fragile health. The food package and the accompanying short visit from a volunteer are critical in assisting them to maintain their independence and maintain a healthier life style. Thus, the program plays an important role in lowering their need for assisted living and increased medical care. Moreover, a number of our community service volunteers continue to serve as volunteers long after they have fulfilled their court ordered community service. Still others become acquainted with Focus: HOPE's training and education programs and begin to make better choices in their lives by enrolling in these career programs.

The opportunity for a volunteer to learn about the devastating effects of poverty and its impact on seniors cannot be underestimated. For many, it's a life altering and perception changing experience. For instance, Mike is an Englishman who works in the metropolitan Detroit area for Ford Motor Company. Mike and his wife are Focus: HOPE volunteers who deliver monthly food packages to a senior citizen who lives in inner city Detroit. Mike became a volunteer after being a member of a group of Ford management employees who toured Focus: HOPE and participated in a one-time community service delivery to homebound seniors as part of their employment.

Mike delivered food to Mary Ann, a homebound woman in her 70's, who lives alone without any means of transportation. When Mike delivered the food and spent a few minutes with

Mary Ann he was stunned to find out that something was going on in this country that he never imagined. He found out that Mary Ann was hungry. She was going without food because her meager social security check of \$450 a month did not stretch far enough to provide the food that she needs because her other basic living expenses leave nothing left over. Moreover, Mary Ann is afraid to leave her house because of the crime in her neighborhood. Her husband died years ago and she is alone.

Mike was shaken deeply by this interaction. He can't believe this is happening in America. Mike made a promise to himself that as long as he is on assignment in this area he will take Mary Ann her monthly food box from Focus: HOPE and he will also bring his wife with him so that they can spend time with Mary Ann. He mentions that they are also committed to bringing Mary Ann additional food and other things she needs because they feel they have to do something and make a difference in her life. What will happen to Mary Ann when Ford reassigns Mike somewhere else?

Many national studies indicate that malnourished elderly patients experience more medical complications, have longer hospital stays, and incur higher hospital costs. It should surprise no one that proper nutrition promotes health, treats chronic disease, decreases hospital length of stay, and saves health care dollars.

As noted earlier, volunteers play a critical role in supporting our program. The benefits of these volunteer services range from ophthalmologists providing free eye screenings and follow-up; accountants providing free tax preparation services; nurses administering flu shots donated by local hospitals; and partnerships with organizations that distribute perishable items from chain supermarkets that are added to the CSFP package whenever possible. Many area corporations, such as Comcast and Ford, as well as churches, youth groups, schools and other civic organizations send groups of individuals to pack and deliver food on a regular basis.

Each year Focus: HOPE's volunteer and community outreach department partners with approximately 7,000 volunteers who coordinate the food program's activities. Another vital community outreach is the Holiday Program. The Holiday Program links volunteers and the donor community with families in need of food during the holiday season. It is not just about food for the moment, but about serving the needs of individuals in a way that restores dignity and self-reliance. The Food Program would not be able to operate without the active participation of volunteers who package, deliver, and distribute food. In turn, the volunteers have a hands-on knowledge of the real issues surrounding hunger and poverty.

A group of University of Michigan graduate students recently volunteered to deliver food to homebound seniors in a 5-story apartment building with a nonworking elevator. The 5-story building was a serious challenge for seniors with physical problems that required their use of an elevator to move from floor to floor. When the students arrived at Mrs. Jones' apartment the door was slightly ajar. Mrs. Jones would open her door when she knew visitors or a food delivery were on their way. It simply took a while for her to get to the door once someone knocked. Everyone immediately noticed the smell of gas when they entered the apartment. This was a small apartment and the students could see Mrs. Jones sitting at her kitchen table next to the stove with the window open just a bit. The gas burners on the stove were turned on high. When the students asked her why all the burners were on, she replied that even though it was

very cold outside and she could well use her heat being on in the apartment, the landlord would not allow the heat to be turned on until November 1st. This happened to be the last week of October, so Mrs. Jones kept the stove on for heat and the window opened slightly so that the gas fumes didn't make her sick or worse.

Mrs. Jones lived with her husband for 28 years before he died. They had children who rarely showed up to help their mother. So she was by herself trying to live off her social security check and make ends meet the best way that she could. Mrs. Jones had worked low paying under-the-table jobs. So the only social security benefits that she was receiving were based on her husband's former modest income. When asked why she didn't confront the landlord about the heat, as well as the elevator, she said that anyone who has a disagreement with the landlord finds themselves evicted the next day and she didn't want to end up out on the streets. When asked why she didn't move somewhere else, she said that she couldn't afford anything better, that she considered her neighbors in the building to be her "family," and she didn't want to leave them. She wasn't receiving any additional assistance besides her social security and the monthly CSFP food box we delivered. She said she had no way of getting to one of the offices where she might be able to apply for more help. Public transportation in Detroit is woefully inadequate and needs much improvement. People know that it is not reliable.

The University of Michigan students were very upset by what they had witnessed. When they returned to the main campus in Ann Arbor, they started making phone calls. Amazing things started happening. A day or so later, but still in October, the heat in that inner city apartment building got turned on. The elevator was miraculously fixed. Those students spent a day out of their hectic lives to deliver food to seniors - what would have happened if they hadn't gone and made a difference in the lives of those seniors?

Our holistic approach to anti-hunger related services restores dignity to the individual - this is done, in part through the way in which food is provided to our clients. Clients arrive in our distribution centers and are treated with respect. They are provided shopping carts and make food selections based on their individual needs within USDA guidelines. Although a subtle distinction, this delivery mode is designed to suggest that they are not receiving a "handout" but instead a "hand up." Their children don't see them being handed a pre-packaged box of food, but instead can help participate in the "shopping" selections that are then taken to a "check-out" counter. Clients come away with a stronger sense of community and possibility. They are not left with the feeling that they are impotent to change their life circumstances, no matter how difficult the struggle might be. In an effort to further the anti-hunger advocacy, Focus: HOPE's staff are on site, ready to enroll individuals in training and educational programs, refer individuals for health screenings, and assist in linking clients to childcare and transportation.

The conditions that are described in this testimony are all too typical for many seniors in this country. The lack of access to high quality food, public transportation, inadequate affordable medical care, and too often unsafe neighborhoods collude to make the so-called golden years far less than golden. This is unconscionable for the most prosperous nation in the world. People who have worked all of their lives and have contributed so much to this nation are being neglected and left on their own at a time when they could most use a helping hand. While we are proud to be a leader in addressing the issues of hunger and poverty locally and nationally,

there is much left to be done.

We are deeply appreciative of your support of programs such as the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which provide a critical lifeline to so many who aren't here to thank you today. We ask for your continued support of these programs and for the seniors and others who rely on them for their most basic human needs. Your commitment to this nation's most vulnerable seniors and the leadership that you have shown in this regard will never be forgotten.

On behalf of the nation's Commodity Supplemental Food Program participants and volunteers nationwide, thank you for your continued support and this opportunity to present testimony for the record.