

TESTIMONY OF RHONDA STEWART

Before the
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
U.S. Senate
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Chairman Tom Harkin and Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen of the Senate, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today.

I would like to begin by introducing myself. I am Rhonda Stewart; I live in Hamilton, Ohio. I'm a high school graduate and have an Associates Degree in Applied Medical Science. I am currently employed at Outreach for Community, a non profit, which helps low to moderate income area residents. I am the president of the PTA, Sunday School teacher, Charter Chair Person for our local Cub Scout pack, Band Booster for the school, assist with cheerleading competitions and a food stamp recipient.

My first experience with the food stamp program began in 2003. I had divorced and was really struggling to get by despite working. One day the nurse at my son Wyatt's school told me he would need to have his tonsils removed as soon as possible and that he needed medications to treat his asthma. I started to cry when I heard this news. The nurse thought I was crying because I was scared about Wyatt having his tonsil removed. She tried to reassure me it was common and there was nothing to worry about. I then told her I didn't have any insurance and didn't know how I would pay for the surgery or the medicine. I knew my son needed these treatments in the worst way and felt as if I had failed him.

I don't know what I would have done that day if the school nurse had not helped me complete the paper work necessary to apply for food stamps and Medicaid for my son. By getting food stamps, I was able to make sure my son was able to eat and get the foods he needed to help him grow.

That was the first time that I participated in the program and received food stamps for almost a year and a half. Around mid 2005, my ex-husband started paying child support again and Wyatt and I no longer needed food stamps.

Unfortunately, after a year of steady child support payments, my ex-husband lost his job due to a plant closure at Sara Lee. The child support, if it came, was not regular and my income just didn't go far enough to pay for our basic needs, especially food

Unfortunately, the cheapest food I could afford to buy was not the healthiest food a growing child needs. I could buy a can of spaghetti-o's for less than a dollar, but a gallon of milk was almost \$3. A pack of Kool-aid cost a dime, but a can of juice cost between \$3.50 - \$4 for a half gallon, depending on the fruit crop. I contacted the outreach worker, Gloria Bateman, at the Shared Harvest Foodbank and asked her to meet with me and another single parent at my office to help us complete an application for food stamps.

Currently, I earn \$900 a month at my job. My rent is \$440 a month, and I pay my utilities

including gas and electric. After paying the rent, utilities, car insurance, gasoline, there isn't much left to meet the needs of my son. Before I started to get food stamps, I paid bills every other month--phone bill this month and electric bill next. I learned how long I could go before I lost my heat. Eventually, I did lose my phone. I was scraping by to buy what groceries I could. In the months when I do receive child support - I must use these funds to catch up on my utilities, in order to avoid having them discontinued. The child support I receive never is spent for food.

Sometimes I could buy real milk for us and sometimes it was powdered milk. I always made sure that my son had something to eat. I say this because on some nights he would ask me if I was feeling okay because I wasn't eating. I would just reply yeah I'm just not hungry tonight buddy.

I am once again receiving food stamps and have been for the last 7 months. I decided to apply for food stamps again because I just couldn't do it on my own anymore - we needed help and I just didn't want my son to suffer.

Unfortunately, the amount of food stamps I receive varies from month to month due to the sporadic child support payments. This month I received \$103 in food stamps and last month I received \$174, it so hard to budget when my food stamps drop so significantly from month to month. I am very grateful for the months when my son is able to eat healthier and more nutritious foods he needs. However, some days he has dinner and I have a grilled cheese sandwich or "I'm just not hungry." I am very careful how I spend my food stamp benefits. I shop at an off brand store some of you may have heard of called Aldi's for most of my groceries. For the first two weeks of the month or so, all is fine. The last few weeks get a little weird. As my son says, "Momma gets creative with dinner."

In the months when my food stamp benefits are lower, I run out of food stamps before the end of the month and I'm always watching the calendar for the first of the month to come so I'll have access to my new benefits and we can eat again. I would love to have fresh veggies in the refrigerator and fresh fruit on the counter. Wyatt loves these foods and would rather have carrots and apples with some dip, than chips and cakes. The sad thing is chips and cakes are cheaper! I don't get chips and snack cakes often for my son because I know they are not good for him, but only as an occasional treat.

Wyatt knows that at the beginning of the month we have the more traditional family dinner with a meat, one or two veggies and maybe corn muffins, which are his favorite. He has also come to learn that toward the end of the month we have generic hamburger helper made with processed ground turkey (cheaper than ground beef.) At the beginning of the month he knows it is okay to ask me to fix his favorite foods again because I will have the ability to get these foods for him. And by his favorites I mean some pork chops and a box of instant stuffing maybe, nothing outrageous.

Many of the things I am saying here today to you, distinguished members of this panel, my son has been unaware of until today. I'm not in the habit of telling a nine year old the state of our finances. Wyatt is on the free breakfast and lunch program at school so this helps during the school year, but during the summer months and days when school isn't in session it's a very

different story. I'm sure any one of you that have children or grand children know that feeding them three times a day is a lot more expensive than feeding them once a day, and if they want a snack then what do you do. If you are a parent such as myself, and can't afford the food you need - you go without.

I ask you to think about something for a moment--is it in the best interest of my child for me to be skipping meals so he can have a full portion. What will happen to my son if I get sick or have other health problems?

I usually have milk in the refrigerator, but do not as often have a bottle of fresh juice for him to drink. I can make a container of grape Kool-aid, but do not often have fresh grapes. I am grateful for the food stamp benefits I receive, but at the end of the month it's not enough. Have you ever seen a child excited when you tell them yes you have enough for them to get a bag of grapes, or some apples, or even a kiwi? Wyatt does.

I am very proud of my son, he's on the honor roll at school and I want him to have a normal a life. There are times when my son wants a friend to spend the night - unfortunately I have to make an excuse - because I don't have enough food to feed them both. It isn't his fault that he lives in a single parent home in a trailer park. I am very good at keeping things hidden from my son and even those outside our front door.

Times are hard, but I am grateful for the food stamp program. It truly makes life better for me and my son and is so very important to the millions of people like us who participate. On behalf of all of us who receive food stamps each month I want to thank you for your support of the program and urge your leadership to make it a better program, by increasing the amount of food stamp benefits people receive each month so that we are able to purchase enough nutritious food that is so important for good health and well-being. This will allow us to eat everyday and not go hungry when our limited benefits run out at the end of the month.

In closing, in addition to my personal experience with the program I want to share with you that one of my duties at my job is as a counselor using The Benefit Bank, a web-based internet program that allows me to help people in situations similar to mine complete applications for a broad array of public benefits, such as the food stamp program. The people that I help are usually parents like me that have fallen on hard times. They tell me they are forced to make difficult choices between paying for housing or buying food - but not both. It gives me great pride to be able to help people who couldn't ask for help from people they thought didn't understand - I tell them I know and it's okay to ask for help.

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to listen to my story and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have at this time.