

# “community Voices”

WHY NUTRITION ASSISTANCE MATTERS



## About this book

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, and school lunch, summer meal, and other nutrition assistance programs are all essential to ensuring that millions of families can get the food they need when they fall on hard times. Yet these programs and the people they serve are not always well understood by either the public or elected officials. Proposals to cut or restrict access to these programs have arisen in Congress and in statehouses across the nation. With Congress due to reauthorize the Child Nutrition and Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, Reauthorization Act—which includes all of the federal school meal and child nutrition programs—we all have an opportunity to build upon previous success and further improve educational achievement, economic security, nutrition, and health for millions of children each day.

In order to highlight the importance of all of these nutrition assistance programs, we called on the real experts—people who benefit directly from them. The Center for American Progress, the Coalition on Human Needs, Witnesses to Hunger, the Food Research & Action Center, Feeding America, and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics joined together to launch a national campaign this summer that asked individuals across the country to share their personal experiences with the nation's nutrition assistance programs.

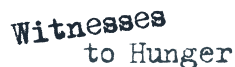
This booklet is a result of that call to action. These community voices speak for themselves and make a clear and compelling case that Congress should protect SNAP during end-of-year funding negotiations and strengthen school lunch, summer meals, WIC, and other programs that ensure better outcomes for children and their families.

*The personal experiences of the contributors in this booklet have been edited for length and clarity.*

*For further information about our contributors and to learn more about these programs, visit <http://www.talkpoverty.org/communityvoices>.*

**Opposite page:**

Jennifer Donald, whose family receives SNAP, eats dinner with her children in Philadelphia on October 8, 2013. (AP/Matt Rourke)





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**Joanna**

Penns Grove, New Jersey  
*Witnesses to Hunger*

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I am a mother. I am a worker. I am a witness. And I am on food stamps.

I work 35 hours a week cooking food for other people while struggling to feed my own family. I have two children, ages 5 and 14, and I work the night shift so I am there to care for my children during the day. This hectic schedule leaves me hungry and always tired. SNAP benefits help me and my family out tremendously. They basically supply most of what the kids need. I only make minimum wage, so with the help of the benefits, I'm able to put food in the refrigerator. Also, with my son being lactose intolerant, I have to be very particular on what type of food and liquids he eats and drinks, and those foods tend to be pricier. SNAP benefits help to offset those costs. Before SNAP, there were times when I was struggling to make sure food was on the table. I would sacrifice eating just so that my children had food. Once we began receiving SNAP, I saw a change in my children's personality and attitude. They were able to focus on school instead of on being hungry. SNAP is definitely important and has had a tremendous impact on my life. There are a lot of families that are in dire need of these programs and cutting them should never be an option.

I receive less than \$6 per day. What other people might spend on their morning coffee at Starbucks, I budget to feed my child for an entire day, and often, I go without eating to make sure my children are fed. Even with SNAP, I struggle to make the money last

for the entire month. I try to buy my children healthy food, but fruits and vegetables are expensive and hard to find in my community. Where they are available at some stands, they do not accept SNAP.

While I work hard in hopes of surviving without food stamps or other public assistance, I raise my voice so others know the importance of SNAP. I am a Witness to Hunger because I have lived hunger and want to make sure my children do not have the same struggles. For that to happen, we need strong nutrition programs to ensure our children have a strong future.



I only make minimum wage, so with the help of the benefits, I'm able to put food in the refrigerator.



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**Linda**

Somerville, Massachusetts  
*Massachusetts Coalition  
of the Homeless*

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Several years ago, I volunteered at a summer program at a park in Morgantown, Kentucky, assisting with skill-building activities. Without this nutrition program, the kids who came would not have had lunch, since school was not in session. If the kids didn't come to that park for nutritional food, I'm not sure if they would have gotten it anywhere else. None of the food was wasted, and if there was any food leftover, the kids would take it back to their families. Food is a basic human right, and our government sometimes forgets that and needs to be reminded. This is a moral imperative for our country to make sure that all people, especially our children, have the resources needed to develop—even more so for families and children in poverty.



**M**y husband and I had been married a few years, and we began that normal progression of what life is all about. He had found a good-paying job, we purchased a home, and we started a family. Things were good. We were on top of the world. Suddenly our world came screeching to a halt as if we had been thrown overboard into stormy seas. My husband lost his job. We went from \$50,000 a year to zero overnight. Many of us who are employed are still only one paycheck away from utter devastation. We found ourselves with a mortgage and twin sons. Our twins were just 9 months old, and one was just diagnosed with cerebral palsy. We felt tossed about and sinking into the ocean with sharks circling. We did not know what to do or where to turn. The WIC program was our life raft during these stormy times, and because of it, we were able to provide nutritious food for our boys. It took a while to get back on our feet and find a decent job. We lost our house, but we never lost hope. The nutritional food from the WIC program was always our life raft during those days and nights of uncertainty. Fast forward 20 years later. My husband works for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and I now work for Head Start, where we provide healthy meals for low-income children. The breakfast and lunch we serve are often the only meals these children receive. We are still paying it forward and extending that life raft to others because there are so many families that feel the way we did. No one should ever lose hope!

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**Mary Janet**

Bowling Green, Kentucky  
*Community Action of  
Southern Kentucky*

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**Natasha**

Seneca, Missouri

*Joplin Economic Security  
Corporation*

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**M**y name is Natasha Russell, and I am a former SNAP recipient as of May 2015. I was a single mother of two, and following the birth of my son, my former employer went out of business. I then decided to further my education, and I received my associate's degree. Immediately thereafter, I started a day care out of my home, and after 3.5 years of still struggling financially, I decided to move to closer to my family in Joplin, Missouri. Upon arriving, I found a paraprofessional position at Joplin High School, making \$10.34 an hour. The wages still left me in poverty. That was my indicator that I needed more education to be competitive in the workplace. I went on to earn my bachelor's degree in 2013, and since then, I have contracted with the Early Head Start program here in Joplin, providing child care for the area's low-income families. I feel that I am giving back to my community by providing child care to other low-income families. I am grateful for all the governmental assistance programs that assisted me and my children in our journey to become self-sufficient: SNAP, day care assistance, Medicaid, subsidized housing, energy assistance, student loans, the U.S. Department of Agriculture mortgage subsidy, and the Missourian's Building Assets

homebuyer program. Poverty isn't forever, but without these programs, it would have been impossible to improve my situation. If these programs were not available, then who would have helped us? Where would I gotten the means to attend college and earn my degrees or the ability to purchase a home? I am grateful that I live in a nation that cares about their people, and that is what makes America great!



Poverty isn't  
forever, but without  
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situation.



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**Andrea**

Denver, Colorado

*Hunger Free Colorado*

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I have fought to overcome poverty from childhood. I completed two college degrees, traveled out of the country, and have helped others in desperate situations. However, I never thought the day would come when I would have to use SNAP. And then, life happened. I fought having to use food stamps, but I was hit with challenges that I never anticipated. I was hungry all the time and eating less to make sure that there was enough food for my children. I finally reached the point of desperation where I found myself sitting on the kitchen floor, crying and staring at my pantry. At that point, I realized that I could go hungry, but I would not let my kids go hungry. I swallowed my pride and applied for SNAP.

There is no reason that anyone should go hungry in this country. I continue to work with Hunger Free Colorado to fight on behalf of those who need a safety net of food security during unexpected times.

I'm Asia, and I currently live in Dallas, Pennsylvania, with my two small children who are 3 and 5 years old and attend Misericordia University. Before I began receiving SNAP and WIC, I lived in New Jersey and often found it very difficult to find and afford food. These programs have been very helpful in allowing me to provide my children with food from different food groups. Before, I would often only have one type of food in the house. WIC specifically has been a lifesaver. It allowed me to feed my son one of the only formulas he could consume, and I was able to afford foods that I was supposed to eat while nursing, which would have been otherwise unattainable. As a result of the program, my kids have definitely become healthier and more energetic, where before they were at times lethargic and slept a lot.

SNAP and WIC are incredibly important for people—not just those in my situation but a lot of families who need to feed their children. Food is very expensive and if you don't have subsidies like these, it can be incredibly difficult to feed children. I know a lot of parents who get paid and spend a lot of money feeding their kids, and sometimes they don't eat. So I think it's incredibly difficult to buy food if you're in a low-income family without programs like these.

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## Asia

Dallas, Pennsylvania  
*Women with Children  
Program, Misericordia  
University*

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## Aubrey

Dallas, Pennsylvania  
*Women with Children  
Program, Misericordia  
University*

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I'm Aubrey, and I was raised in Shippensburg and recently moved with my 3-year-old daughter to Dallas, Pennsylvania, for school. Before I received SNAP, there were times when I didn't know if I had enough food to feed my child. There were times when I had to consider whether buying necessities like gas and electricity were more beneficial than buying a loaf of bread and butter for dinner that night. I would try to save everything that I had to make up small meals and figure out different varieties of things that my daughter, a picky eater, would enjoy.

I remember the one day I had to tell myself that I needed to get SNAP. I couldn't do it anymore. There wasn't any food left in the refrigerator, and I had come to my wits' end. Since we have been able to receive SNAP, it has been an incredible help for my family. I've been able to provide my daughter with food and the nutrition that she needs, and I can definitely see the difference. She has more energy and has gained some healthy weight since being on SNAP. I'm thankful that I'm able to provide the basic needs for my daughter because I know that some people aren't able to. These programs are needed. It's what helps us. It's what provides for us. We need to have nutritional food for our children, and we also need nutritional food for ourselves so we are able to provide for and properly raise our children.

I work as the community liaison at McElwain Elementary in Thornton, Colorado. I speak with parents and families on a regular basis and hear their struggles when it comes to putting food on the table. All of my students receive free lunch, and my colleagues and I struggle to make sure they get free breakfast as well. For now, we rely on donations from food banks and community groups to make sure kids get breakfast, but sometimes we can't provide it when there's not enough food. Nothing makes me feel worse than a child crying because their tummy is empty and hurts. I'm thankful that we have local charities that help provide weekend food packages for my students, and I am constantly on the lookout to help families who need some assistance.

We need more programs and more opportunities if we want these kids to get out of the cycle their parents are in.



Nothing makes me feel worse than a child crying because their tummy is empty and hurts.



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**Carolina**

Thornton, Colorado

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**Christopher**

Largo, Florida

*RESULTS*

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**Opposite page:**

Maggie Barcellano helps her daughter use a pepper grinder during dinner in Austin, Texas, on January 25, 2014. Barcellano enrolled in SNAP to help her save money while she works as a home health aide and raises her daughter. (AP/Tamir Kalifa)

I am currently an advocate for many causes in the midst of being in a low-income status. I consistently contact my elected officials on issues that affect me, my community, and the nation as whole. I feel being engaged in my community allows me to make a difference. I currently reside in a public housing community. I am a recipient of SNAP and energy assistance. I also have a visual disability and ADHD, for which I have been approved for services from the Florida Division of Blind Services and Vocational Rehabilitation. SNAP allows me to have food and be able to go to a grocery store to buy quality foods, especially fruits, veggies, and lean meats.

I feel now more than ever that low-income people need to rise up and fight for justice and activate their legal rights.



SNAP allows me to ... go to a grocery store to buy quality foods, especially fruits, veggies, and lean meats.







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**Jonetta**

Sacramento, California  
*Western Center on Law  
& Poverty*

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**M**y name is Jonetta. I left an abusive relationship, and now I am raising my daughter by myself. My daughter participates in the school meal program and the after-school snack program. The snack program really helps so that my daughter isn't as hungry when she gets home from school. We also receive \$356 a month in SNAP. This money is supposed to supplement my food budget, but it is really all of my food budget because my income barely covers my rent. Right now, I'm homeless, and it's hard to find a place to live for less than \$500 a month. Because of SNAP, we are not starving. As a mom, I try to cut out a lot of bad food from my family's diet, but it is a difficult task to buy the healthier food because it is expensive. It's also very difficult because we have been homeless for a couple months so I have to use other people's refrigerators. I am very thankful for these programs and to all the people who are trying to make these programs better. They really help me and my daughter.

**T**hirty-one years ago, I was pregnant. Neither of us was employed at the time. When our son was born prematurely, he had to be treated for nine months out of his first year in Riley Hospital—an hour drive from our home. We had to spend down to become eligible to receive Medicaid for him to help cover the \$250,000 medical bills his multiple surgeries and intensive care unit treatment cost. When he came home, we were eligible for WIC services that provided some nutritional support for both him and me, as I was nursing him part of the time. The people at the WIC office were incredibly supportive and helpful at a time when I really needed some TLC myself. At that time, the WIC coupons made a real difference in our grocery bill so that our food dollars were stretched further. Many people use our country's nutrition assistance programs for a short time, as I did. These programs are essential to individual and family well-being. Cutting these programs makes it so much more difficult for people just trying to make ends meet. Without good nutrition, children cannot learn in school and adults cannot be productive. No one should go without food in this country.



No one should  
go without food  
in this country.



**Kathy**

Bloomington, Indiana

*Coalition on Human Needs*

## FAST FACTS ON THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM



1 mil

1 million unemployed adults without children will lose Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits as state waivers expire.

Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Approximately 1 Million Unemployed Childless Adults Will Lose SNAP Benefits in 2016 as State Waivers Expire" (2015).

For every \$1 invested, SNAP contributes \$1.70 back to the economy.

Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Introduction to SNAP" (2015).



4.7 mil



SNAP lifted 4.7 million people out of poverty, including 2.1 million children, in 2014.

Source: TalkPoverty, "New Census Data Demand Action on Inequality and Poverty," September 17, 2015.

Research has shown that receipt of SNAP in early childhood improves high school graduation rates, adult earnings, and adult health.

Source: The White House, "Six Examples of the Long-Term Benefits of Anti-Poverty Programs," May 11, 2015.



## SNAP IS TARGETED AT THOSE WHO NEED IT MOST

1/3

of SNAP participants  
are in households that  
include senior citizens or  
people with disabilities.

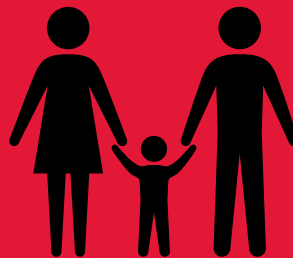


92%

of benefits go to households with  
incomes below the poverty line.  
This includes millions of  
working-poor families.

3/4

of SNAP  
participants are  
in families with  
children.



Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Introduction to SNAP" (2015).

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**Robin**

Englewood, Colorado

*Hunger Free Colorado*

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When I was in kindergarten, my parents' dissolving marriage left my mom, sister, and I in poverty. I distinctly remember my mom having to borrow my savings to buy food. I decided I would never find myself in that situation. Becoming a doctor seemed like the perfect answer: help others and always have security. At 30 years old, I was married with two children and a good job as a family physician. I also had a tiny hobby practice to help people who were uninsured. I was only just starting to learn about the many effects of poverty when I had the most educational and personal experience of my life. When my son was just 3 years old and my daughter an infant, I suffered a vertebral artery dissection and two strokes.

The strokes were cerebellar, so it did not affect me cognitively; however, they left me very dizzy and fatigued. I didn't have the stamina to care for my children all day, but I could function normally as a physician for a few hours. Chopping food and cooking dinner was too tiring, but suturing a wound was quick and still within my abilities.

We soon realized that our only option was for me to continue to work and my husband to care for both me and our children. I quit my main practice and worked only at my hobby practice, where I could set my hours based on my needs as I recovered. We lived on our savings until they started to run out.

It took me awhile to realize that we would qualify for food assistance. My husband and I were both working as hard as we could. This wasn't supposed to happen to us. At the same time, I had been recommending to my patients that they sign up for food assistance—saying that needing it had nothing to do with how good a person they were or how hard they were working. The safety net is there for these sorts of situations.

My experiences using food stamps and facing society's negative perceptions led me to have a strong desire to share my story. There is no shame in needing help. It is the responsibility of a civilized country to make sure that everyone has access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, and medical care.

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**Robin**

Hugo, Minnesota

*Fair Share*

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In 1988, for my 27th birthday present to myself, I asked my husband to leave. I was terrified of being a single mother but more afraid of what might happen if I stayed with him. I knew this would mean going on welfare and food stamps, but I was determined that it would be a temporary situation.

The day I applied for food stamps, I also applied to attend the local community college. I spent the next 2.5 years working part time, going to school full time, and using public assistance, including food stamps and free or reduced lunches for my two daughters.

When I finished my associate's degree, I found a full-time job and was able to get off of all of the assistance programs except for the free or reduced school lunch program for my kids. I was thrilled and very proud of myself. This part of my life was behind me. I could move forward and never look back.

I eventually became involved in A Minnesota Without Poverty and joined the effort to end poverty in the state of Minnesota by 2020. I had come so far! Then just before the age of 50, I lost my job. Unemployment was high, and I had a terrible time finding another job. I was also having health complications and needed surgery. Everything was snowballing. My unemployment ran out, and I had no income at all. I was forced to swallow my pride yet again and apply for SNAP and medical assistance.



I finally found another job after 2.5 years only to lose it again 7 months later and have to apply for assistance again. I found a part-time job, ironically working for a local food pantry. My income is still low enough that I qualify for some assistance from SNAP, but at least I can pay my mortgage.

I feel blessed to be a part of the food pantry and all it does to not just meet the nutritional needs of our clients, but also to refer them to other services, such as SNAP, in the area and to help encourage healthy eating. Because of my experiences with nutrition assistance programs and witnessing how they have helped me throughout the years, I have even been able to use my own story to ease the anxiety of a young single mother coming into the food pantry for the first time, and for that, I am grateful.



The day I applied for food stamps, I also applied to attend the local community college.



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## Sherry

Los Angeles, California

*Fair Share*

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I hated being on food stamps. I hated being inspected and queried to make sure we were really our mother's kids and then leaving with some vouchers for groceries. I hated standing in line at the grocery store, knowing we were not going to be paying with real money but rather with coupons that would brand us as poor.

I hated it, and yet I loved the fact that we had food! As a growing kid, I knew what it was like to come home to a bare kitchen, and I knew that those dreaded coupons and vouchers meant we got cheese and milk, eggs and cereal, beans and tortillas, and yes, sometimes even some ice cream.

As the eldest of four children—first, in a home with two working parents and, later, in a home with only one partially employed parent—I did my fair share of child care, house-cleaning, and cooking from an early age.

At school, I got free lunch and later breakfast. I was grateful for the mercy of a lunch system that made it possible for me to feel normal and happy as I ate my mystery meat and Tater Tots.

I ate all that free food, and—thanks in large part to it—I grew healthy and strong, and I paid attention in school, and I did really well. My brain was fueled by free food, for

sure—and I used every bit of it to soak up the education I knew I would need so that my kids wouldn't have to endure the humiliation that I did. I had friends with professional parents who had gone to college. I had parents who told me every day that I could achieve anything if I worked hard enough and followed the rules.

I'm currently a senior vice president in Fox's television networks group, and I've paid more in taxes over the past 25 years than my entire family got in government assistance, not to mention donating privately to families in need and charitable organizations. We needed the proverbial leg up. We used it, and today, my brothers and I are all fully employed taxpayers who support ourselves and our families.

We ate that food, and we swallowed our pride, believing that a better day would come. I would do it again tomorrow if I had to. I thank God that I don't—but I also thank God that when I did, the possibility was there.



We needed the proverbial leg up. We used it, and today, my brothers and I are all fully employed taxpayers who support ourselves and our families.



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## Simone and DeAnna

Portland, Oregon

*Partners for a Hunger-Free  
Oregon*

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Earlier this summer in Vernonia, Oregon, an 8-year-old girl started a lemonade stand a few miles outside of the small town and earned almost \$80. She donated all of her proceeds to the Vernonia Summer Meal Program in honor of her dear friend, Lorelai. Lorelai grew up coming to the meal site every summer. At 6 years old, she served as one of the youngest members on the site's volunteer team. Two years ago, she passed away in a car accident.

"She was my buddy, we had a secret handshake," recalls DeAnna, the site's grants and media director. "She was so excited about being here, and she was amazing. She just wanted to help. She just always wanted to be here. ... The first summer we had without her, we were bereft. We had such a hard time."

The local kids would have an even harder time if it weren't for the federally funded meal program. In the remote logging community of Vernonia, 80 percent of the residents commute to work so regular summer lunches are not something that many young people can plan on receiving while home alone. For those who depend on subsidized lunches throughout the school year, the carefree days of summer are not all fun and games.

“We had kids come the day after school was out, wanting food—we weren’t open,” DeAnna observes. “They came in on a Saturday. They come before our doors are open. That’s what hunger looks like in our community. The kids are bringing themselves.”

“Food insecurity is real,” DeAnna asserts. “It’s not enough to give a kid a corn dog. It’s about getting access to really good, nutritional food. We are so limited by what we can purchase. We are limited in how we order things, but we are able to open up the possibilities and can now offer gluten-free breads because we have the donations.”

Congress needs to enable summer meal programs to run fully, like the one in Vernonia. Increased funding would empower such programs to not only feed the bellies of young Americans, but also to make that proverbial lemonade by feeding their spirits too. Summer meal sites can provide kids with a safe space to be given nutritious food and build a community. There, they can learn to be healthy, to be stewards in their community, and to help others—just like Lorelai loved to do.



We had kids  
come the day  
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**Mark**

Kingston, Pennsylvania  
*Al Beech West Side Food Pantry*

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**Opposite page:**

Fairmeadow Elementary School students pick up milk during a school lunch program in Palo Alto, California, on December 2, 2010. (AP/Paul Sakuma)

I'm a veteran who served in the U.S. Navy back in 1968. I served for four years on active duty volunteering for hazardous work with the submarine service. After my four years, I came out of duty with some problems associated with the service. I became a plumber and worked mostly in Manhattan, New York. I'm legally disabled and receive a small veterans pension that acknowledges my disability. I live off of my pension, whatever I can scrape up from Social Security Disability Insurance, and I receive \$33 in SNAP benefits. Then, there's the financial considerations of how much do I have left over to actually buy food. I'm not sure what to do. At the age of 65, I've noticed that my health is deteriorating at an accelerated rate, partially because of my poor nutrition and because I lack the amount of adequate food to stay healthy.

Personally, I'm struggling and I'm apprehensive, but I'm also hopeful that the people who have a hand in controlling what and how these programs are and what people get will understand that out here things are tough if they just look at things realistically and see what were up against. As a veteran, as a citizen, as a person, I'm just struggling day to day with getting enough nutrition and being able to be healthy and happy. That's what we do as people. We try to stay healthy, happy, and productive as people, and that's my hope.



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**Tianna**

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

*Witnesses to Hunger*

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**H**i, my name is Tianna. I'm the proud mother of three beautiful children. I also have two wonderful stepdaughters. I have been with my husband for 16 years. We have been homeless twice with our children. I receive SNAP benefits, and my children participate in the school meals program. Also, when my children were younger, we received WIC. All of these programs have helped me in one way or another.

I remember days when we didn't have enough food but I knew that my children would have something to eat because of the free lunch program. This would help relieve some of my worries, but only momentarily, because I would have to find a way to provide meals for them when they came home. Have you ever been so hungry that you couldn't wait for the next day because you knew that you would be receiving your SNAP benefits and you could finally go food shopping for your family? I have walked in the shoes of the pain and depression of hungry. Trust me, it's not pretty. I never forget going to a block in my neighborhood to get a summer lunch. It may not have been the best-tasting food, but it quieted the hungry sounds.

All three of my children have medical disabilities and take medication every day that enables them to live. At one point, I received a major cut in my SNAP benefits because me and my husband had part-time jobs. Wow, things were really tight, and at the end of the month, we ran out of food.



I'm an advocate for change not just for my family but for families all over the country. I live in one of the hungriest districts in the country. I would tell Congress how important these programs are to me and my family. So before Congress makes cuts, I want them to look in my children's eyes and explain to them why there won't be enough food on their plates tonight. I want them to explain to them why food is getting low. I don't want a handout, I want a hand-in. Walk in my shoes for just one day, and before you make the decision to cut these nutrition assistance programs, think about how you're cutting the livelihoods of many senior citizens, children, military families, and families that work multiple jobs just to make ends meet. Can we work together to strengthen our safety net so that we will not fall through the holes straight down to the bottom and have to scratch and dig for our way out? I ask you to close your eyes and hear my voice and remember these are the footsteps of my life. We all have a place at the table, no matter your race or your sexuality or your ZIP code.



Have you ever been so hungry that you couldn't wait for the next day because you knew that you would be receiving your SNAP benefits?



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**Tiara**

Chicago, Illinois  
*St. Joseph Services*

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I have been on both sides of the food divide. After the birth of my daughter six years ago, I found myself in difficult times and having trouble providing the nutritious foods that my daughter needed, especially in her first year of life. Although I was working a full-time job, I could not afford the expensive formula for my daughter in addition to all the other expenses that go into raising a child. So I applied for SNAP benefits and received \$112 a month for the first year in the program. I would buy one can of milk a week for my daughter and pray that it would last me until the next week.

Today, I serve as a site manager for the nonprofit organization St. Joseph Services, and while I was once the recipient of nutrition assistance, I now help others in need. St. Joseph provides education programs for youth in several of the most underserved neighborhoods of the city. About 300 students come through my after-school program and summer camp every day, and many of these kids are dependent on the site for food services. During the summer, kids stream through the site from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Their parents often lack the resources to provide their kids with the necessary nutrients to get them through these long days, and St. Joseph helps fill the gap.

Kids are in a better mood once they eat breakfast. All the kids eat lunch and snacks together, but the biggest difference is after breakfast. You can tell they are ready for the day. As a result of meals made affordable through the Summer Food Services Program, kids are prepared to participate in the educational, creative, and recreational activities of the program, keeping them engaged and active during the summer months.

It wasn't always this way. When I first started here, meals were difficult to provide—especially breakfast. As a result, many kids went until midday without anything to eat. St. Joseph now receives support from the Summer Food Services Program, which has allowed us to provide breakfast, lunch, and afternoon snacks. Most recently, state funding has been cut for these programs, and we have had a difficult time feeding all the children in our program. I would ask Congress to provide more funding so that no child in my program will go hungry another day.



Kids are in a better mood once they eat breakfast. ... You can tell they are ready for the day.



## CHILD NUTRITION FACTS

Only 1 in 6 students who received school meals had access to a meal during the summer months.

Source: Food Research & Action Center, "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation" (2015).

17.5% 

Students who participated in school breakfast scored 17.5% higher on math tests on average than those who did not.

Source: Share Our Strength, "Ending childhood hunger: A social impact analysis" (2013).



Every \$1 spent on preventive services for a pregnant woman in the Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, program saves \$4.21 in Medicaid costs by reducing the risk of preterm birth and associated costs.

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics, "Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children" (last accessed September 2015).



1.5 million WIC participants utilized farmers markets in 2013.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, "WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program" (2014).



More than 50% of the kids born in the United States today will turn to WIC.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, "WIC at a Glance" (last accessed September 2015).

WIC served nearly 9 million women, infants, and children each month in 2013.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, "WIC: The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children" (2014).



Summer meals helped close the hunger gap for 3.2 million children—or nearly 1 in 6 low-income children—in July 2014.

Source: Food Research & Action Center, "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation" (2015).

## Top 10 performing states

State	Ratio of students in summer nutrition to students in the National School Lunch Program	Rank
District of Columbia	59.0	1
New Mexico	37.0	2
New York	31.2	3
Vermont	29.4	4
Connecticut	27.0	5
Arkansas	23.5	6
Idaho	22.6	7
Maine	21.8	8
Maryland	21.6	9
South Carolina	20.1	10

Source: Food Research & Action Center, "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation" (2015).

## Bottom 10 performing states

State	Ratio of students in summer nutrition to students in the National School Lunch Program	Rank
Alabama	10.3	41
West Virginia	10.3	41
Nebraska	9.5	43
Colorado	9.3	44
Hawaii	9.1	45
Mississippi	8.4	46
Nevada	8.4	46
Kentucky	7.5	48
North Dakota	7.2	49
Kansas	7.0	50
Oklahoma	6.7	51

Source: Food Research & Action Center, "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation" (2015).

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**Vivian**

Oakland, California

*Alameda County Community  
Food Bank and Western Center  
on Law and Poverty*

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I am a single, two-job working parent of three wonderful daughters, ages 12, 14, and 21, living in Oakland, California. I successfully earned my college degree while on public assistance, and I have overcome years of extreme adversity, having experienced poverty, homelessness, public housing, food insecurity, economic instability, and the untimely passing of my children's father. SNAP, WIC, and the national school lunch and breakfast programs have helped my family in every way imaginable! All of these programs were truly integral in ensuring my children had well-balanced nutrition and food security daily.

The WIC program especially helped us after its implementation of fresh food choices and better nutritional options. At times, the WIC program was truly a lifeline of food security for my family. My children were also guaranteed to receive nutritional meals through the free school lunch program, which is excellent in Berkeley. The program ensured food security with high nutritional value, including the summer lunch programs that were offered in our community through sponsorship from the Alameda County Community Food Bank. In addition to these food programs, the breakfast programs in my children's schools also made a huge difference and helped them learn better in the classroom. Also, SNAP was a critical food safety net for our family, creating equitable access to healthier food choices, including access to shopping at our local farmers market and being able to use my SNAP electronic benefits transfer card.

Over time, having these food safety net programs surely improved the overall health, well-being, and nutritional value within our household. All of these food assistance programs truly made a prolific difference and had a positive impact on my family during difficult times in our lives when we were experiencing severe economic adversity. I will always be thankful and grateful for the food safety net programs like SNAP and WIC; the community-based food programs, food pantries, and local food banks; and the school lunch and breakfast and summer lunch programs. They were truly the lifeline for my family and continue to be for many low-income families in our community who are in great need for food security.



I will always be thankful and grateful for the food safety net programs like SNAP and WIC.



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**Donna**

Kingston, Pennsylvania  
*Women with Children,  
Misericordia University*

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I'm a single mother of three: two girls ages 8 and 12 and a 14-year-old son who was born medically disabled. I recently got a divorce from my ex-spouse who was abusive, and now I'm living in poverty. Some people tend to think that people who experience poverty are lazy and uneducated. I would beg to differ. I have a master's in public administration and criminal justice. I was also on the dean's list and honors list and in the National Criminal Justice Honors Society. Prior to raising my children, I worked for 15 years at a factory, and I was an associate of the month and top producer holding down two jobs to put myself through college. Since my divorce, I've had a very difficult time finding paid work. I currently work for 10 nonprofits, all of which are unpaid, and I've probably put over 50 applications in the last four years and have had only four interviews.

My son was born with a medical disability that caused stomach reflux. In order to eat, he needed a specific formula, which was extremely expensive. Thankfully, WIC was there to help out. SNAP and the National School Lunch Program were and are beneficial for our survival. My kids depend on nutrition and proper food, and without these programs, we wouldn't be able to survive. The National School Lunch Program helps my kids tremendously because I simply can't afford to feed them three meals a day.



During these times, nutrition assistance programs have been my life support. Because my children are able to have nutritious and healthy foods, they are happy and excelling in school. My son, who was supposed to have mental and speech delays, has overcome so many obstacles and continues to do well in school. His success and my other children's successes are testaments to the impact and benefits of these nutrition assistance programs. I hope that Congress can see this importance and will continue to put more funding into these programs because they truly are a means of survival for us.



Some people tend to think that people who experience poverty are lazy and uneducated. I would beg to differ.





## Breakfast

With the money food stamps provide, I was able to feed her breakfast that morning. Without it what would she have eaten? I wanted to show that with the help, she was able to eat breakfast. She had cereal. She had milk. She didn't have to go without.

PHOTO AND VOICE BY CRYSTAL



## Healthy Food Is Expensive

My husband and I are overweight due to unhealthy food. Unhealthy food is less expensive, but I feel like in the long run, it will cause more medical problems, which in turn will cause expensive bills from health providers. Sometimes it can be a struggle to make sure the older children are eating healthy. I'm thankful to Baltimore City Public Schools for providing free breakfast to our children.

PHOTO AND VOICE BY MARGARET, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND



## Hope

Hunger lives here and so does hope. I like that saying. That's something. That's deep. It means that they're helping. They're helping the environment. They're helping the community.

PHOTO AND VOICE BY NIA, CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY

## Calling on Congress

Programs such as SNAP, WIC, and school, summer, child care, and after-school meals have an immediate impact on families facing economic insecurity around the country. They are vital to the health and well-being of our communities and the overall economy. Strengthening nutrition programs and protecting them from cuts is critical to keeping the nation strong.

As this book shows, families who use nutrition assistance programs are experts on the importance of these programs. We call on Congress to learn from their experiences and invest in them.

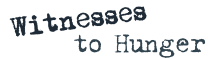
The experts highlighted in this book are available to speak further about their experiences. If you would like to connect with them, please contact Michael C. Richardson at the Center for American Progress at 202.796.9708 or [mcrichardson@americanprogress.org](mailto:mcrichardson@americanprogress.org).

..... *Members of the Witnesses to Hunger program*



**“Community Voices: Why Nutrition Assistance Matters”**  
was developed through a national grassroots campaign asking individuals  
and service providers to share their personal experiences  
with vital nutrition assistance programs.

The national sponsors of this campaign—the Center for American Progress, the Coalition on Human Needs, the Food Research & Action Center, Witnesses to Hunger, Feeding America, and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics—would like to thank our community partners across the country for their contributions.



Academy of Nutrition  
and Dietetics

