

Testimony Submitted for the Record

On behalf of the

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,

Catholic Charities USA,

Catholic Rural Life

and

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul

before the

House Committee on Agriculture

***“The Past, Present, and Future of SNAP: The World of Nutrition and the
Role of the Charitable Sector”***

April 24, 2015

Introduction

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA), Catholic Rural Life (CRLC) and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVDP) are grateful for the opportunity to provide this testimony for the hearing, *The Past, Present, and Future of SNAP: The World of Nutrition and the Role of the Charitable Sector*.

The Catholic community brings moral principles drawn from our faith tradition and everyday experience deeply rooted in communities throughout the country, in service to our hungry, poor and vulnerable brothers and sisters in need. By our own efforts and our advocacy on public policy priorities, we seek to help provide adequate nutrition for poor and hungry people. At our parishes, Catholic Charities agencies, St. Vincent de Paul conferences, soup kitchens and in our schools, we see the faces of poor and hungry people every day. We feed those without work, children, pregnant women, and seniors living on a limited income. For many of them, the meal they receive from our ministries and charities is the most nutritious meal they receive that day.

The Church teaches that food is a human right and that the “scandal of hunger” affects, not just a number or statistic, but a human person. Pope Francis reminds us that the right to food “Can only be ensured if we care about the actual subject, that is, the person who suffers the effects of hunger and malnutrition.” In *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers*, the U.S. bishops state, “Our commitment to the dignity of every person requires a special concern for those who are poor and vulnerable, whose needs are greatest, and whose lives and dignity are often threatened by hunger, poverty, and suffering.” As a community of faith, we join to express our support for **The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** which has proven essential in effectively serving the “least of these” among us.

The Importance of SNAP

SNAP is the first line of defense for people who do not have enough food each month. In 2014, SNAP served more than 46 million people throughout the nation.¹ With the purchasing power of food stamp dollars decreasing and food prices rising, vulnerable people, especially children and seniors, cannot afford to have their benefits further cut or reduced.

SNAP is at risk for cuts and harmful program changes that will reduce benefits for people still struggling to get back on their feet. As Congress debates its budgetary priorities, it is important to ensure that hungry, working poor and vulnerable people do not become the focus of harmful cuts to anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs. Congress should consider that:

- 1. SNAP helps lift up human life and dignity by helping feed the “least of these.” In fiscal year 2013, 75 percent of SNAP households included a child, senior or disabled member and 83 percent had incomes below the federal poverty guideline;²**
- 2. SNAP works well and has one of the lowest error rates of any federal program. In**

¹ USDA Food and Nutrition Service (2015). “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs.” Retrieved April 20, 2015, from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/SNAPsummary.pdf>

² Gray, Kelsey Farson (December 2014). *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2013*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support.

2013, SNAP achieved its lowest overpayment error rate on record at 2.6%³;

- 3. SNAP lifted approximately 4.8 million people out of poverty in 2013, including about 2.1 million children⁴;**
- 4. Churches and charities cannot do it alone. If you combine all federal and private resources for food assistance in the U.S., only about 9% is from charitable organizations.⁵**

We also ask you to maintain the effectiveness and integrity of SNAP to protect, support and strengthen this critical program to better serve hungry and vulnerable people:

- **Prevent cuts or reductions** to the SNAP program. Reductions or technical changes that would result in a loss or erosion of benefits to hungry and vulnerable people must be rejected;"
- **Do not erode benefits or promote barriers** to access. States should have flexibility in finding effective ways to feed hungry people and respond adequately to local needs but this should not result in a loss or a reduction in benefits, especially for children;
- **Maintain the current entitlement structure** of SNAP so that it may continue to respond to people suffering as a result of economic hardship or other unforeseen crises;
- **Maintain “categorical eligibility”** for food stamps. People, who receive benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), should also be able to receive food stamps to meet their needs without additional bureaucracy or paperwork;
- **Simplify the application process** to better serve working families and seniors who are underserved by the SNAP program;

Review and repeal the current provisions penalizing low-income families headed by a parent with a past drug conviction.

SNAP and the Catholic Response to Hunger

Catholic organizations and institutions including Catholic Charities and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, live out the corporal works of mercy, one of which includes feeding the hungry. Driven by our faith, we continue to find means to serve as many persons and families as we can with our donated private resources.

The 150,000 volunteers of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul located in 4,400 communities throughout the U.S. continue to see rising numbers of people in need. In 2013, Catholic

³ USDA Food and Nutrition Service (2014). “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Payment Error Rates FY2013.” Retrieved April 20, 2015, from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/snap/2013-rates.pdf>

⁴ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (8 January 2015). “Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),” p. 7.

⁵ Oliveira, Victor (March 2015). The Food Assistance Landscape: FY 2014 Annual Report, EIB-137. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

National Center for Charitable Statistics at the Urban Institute. “Number of Public Charities in the United States, 2013.” Retrieved April 20, 2015, from <http://nccsweb.urban.org/PubApps/profileDrillDown.php?state=US&rpt=PC>

Charities agencies reached more clients through food services than ever before: some 9.6 million people, including 1.3 million to hungry children. This represents some 56 percent of all services provided by Catholic Charities that year, and is more than double the 4.4 million hunger services provided through the network in 2003.⁶

However, despite doubling our efforts over the last decade to meet this most basic need of our neighbors, hunger in the United States remains persistently high. Although the economy is beginning to modestly improve, there are still an unacceptable number of jobless and underemployed people, and children and seniors struggling with hunger and poverty. In 2013, 49 million people in the U.S., including 16 million children, and more than a million seniors living alone, experienced food insecurity.⁷

Rural America is particularly impacted by hunger, food insecurity and high rates of poverty. On average, sixteen percent of people in rural communities live in poverty, a rate higher than those living in metropolitan areas.⁸ In especially stressed areas, rural poverty rates are considerably higher. It is ironic and unacceptable that where our food is produced so many people suffer from hunger and food insecurity. SNAP benefits many of these families struggling to make ends meet.

Catholic Charities agency directors from across the country, serving in urban, suburban, and rural communities tell us that hunger is a major issue where they serve and that SNAP is critical to alleviating poverty more broadly in their communities. They identify hunger as an entry point for clients to access their broader array of services, but stress that if households do not have food and safe shelter it is almost impossible to address the other factors that are keeping them in crisis or generational poverty. SNAP is necessary for most clients to stabilize before they can move out of poverty.⁹

Catholic Charities of Wilmington, Delaware shares the following as just one success story of client for whom SNAP played this role: “PG, a Basic Needs client, came to CCW after separating from his wife. PG had no income and no knowledge of how to navigate the state Social Service Centers. The Case Managers were able to complete the application for SNAP and General Assistance online for PG. During this meeting PG also joined the agency's food distribution program and signed up for continued Case Management. Today PG is gainfully employed and volunteering at the food distribution site.”

Catholic Charities of Central Florida shares a similar story from a client, Tom, a homeless man, who approached the agency requesting food. In addition to providing emergency food, the agency helped him apply for SNAP benefits and introduced him to vocational rehabilitation programs. After several visits, Tom enrolled in a Certified Nursing Assistant course, which he completed and is now taking care of others. Reflecting upon his experience, Tom stated, “[I've had] a little bit of a rough life, but it's places like this that start to make you

⁶ *Catholic Charities USA Annual Survey* [Dataset, 2003-2013]. Survey conducted by Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University.

⁷ Coleman-Jensen, A., Gregory, C., & Singh, A (2014). Household Food Security in the United States in 2013. USDA ERS.

⁸ DeNavas-Walt, Carmen and Bernadette D. Proctor (2014). U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-249, Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC.

⁹ Reflects opinions of agency leadership gathered in an internal online survey conducted in March 2015.

think it's not as bad as it looks...There is work out there. You just gotta get yourself up and go get it."

Yet, SNAP and the broader network of food assistance continue to fall short for millions of our brothers and sisters. Feeding America's latest Map the Meal Gap study estimates that an additional \$24 billion of investment was necessary to meet the needs of the food insecure population in 2013.¹⁰ This is more than double the total revenue of charitable organizations dedicated to food, agriculture, and nutrition in 2013.¹¹ The capacity of the charitable sector simply pales in comparison to the scope of the governmental assistance. In FY2014, the USDA domestic food and nutrition assistance program budgets totaled \$103.6 billion, more than ten times that of the charitable sector.¹²

Though our charitable ministries will continue to provide services to persons and families that come to our doors – especially related to those that are hungry -- private charitable donations are necessary, but not sufficient, to respond to the need. Last month, as much as 40 percent of the Catholic Charities network faced unmet need and waiting lists in their food services programs. Cuts to federal nutrition programs, in particular SNAP, further strain the charitable sector to fill the gap with private dollars, thereby diverting dollars and staff time away from other ministries that help move individuals and families permanently out of poverty.

Our agencies, parishes, food pantries and schools, combine private resources with government partnerships to maximize impact through public-private partnerships. In 2013, 53 Catholic Charities agencies alone assisted more than 54,000 adults through SNAP outreach and enrollment, helping eligible members of their communities navigate what is often a complicated, lengthy application and recertification process. Recognizing the significant individual and community benefits of increasing SNAP enrollment through charitable outreach, the Walmart Foundation has provided generous private grant support to strengthen these efforts over the past two years.

A stronger partnership between churches, charities, business and government must respond effectively to rising needs and ensure food security for all Americans.

Conclusion

The Catholic community brings a unique perspective to domestic nutrition policy. Our vision is rooted in our Catholic social teaching tradition and our active presence in the life of communities throughout this country. We respond because Jesus constantly reminds us: "For I was hungry and you gave me food" (Mt 25:35).

SNAP remains one of the most effective federal programs to help hungry and low income people struggling to make ends meet. Our nation has a moral obligation to ensure that food insecure people have enough nutritious food to eat. Together, we call on Congress to support and sustain the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to serve children, seniors, and people with disabilities and struggling families.

¹⁰ Feeding America (2015). "Map the Meal Gap 2015: A Report on County and Congressional District Level Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2013."

¹¹ Accounts for organizations within Code K, "Food, Agriculture, and Nutrition" of the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities. National Center for Charitable Statistics at the Urban Institute.

¹² Oliveira (March 2015).