



Testimony of

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Joint Hearing on Bill 18-0182: the Food Stamp Expansion Act of 2009

Committee on Human Services

Committee on Government Operations and the Environment

Council of the District of Columbia

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Council Chambers

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Chairperson Wells, Chairperson Cheh, and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony here today. My name is Srinidhi Vijaykumar and I am a Nutrition Associate at D.C. Hunger Solutions, an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center. D.C. Hunger Solutions works to create a hunger-free community by improving the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income people.

With the effects of the recession deepening, more and more District families are turning to the Food Stamp Program. Over 101,000 D.C. residents benefited from food stamps in January and participation continues to increase, showing how the program can respond and grow in times of need. These food stamp benefits flowing into the District (approximately \$9.3 million a month)<sup>1</sup> are entirely federally funded, and foster an additional \$16 million in monthly local economic activity.<sup>2</sup> With the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, federal stimulus funding has further strengthened the program. For example, most households of three have seen their benefit go up by \$63 as of April 1<sup>st</sup>. This will result in \$750 more annually for most three-person households, making a huge difference in these tight times, and provide a \$17.3 million increase annually in federally-funded benefits overall.<sup>3</sup>

Given the strengthening of the Food Stamp Program at the federal level and the District's decreased revenues and growing needs, now is the moment for the District to pursue the goal of food stamp improvements that will expand access, increase benefits, and drawn down millions of federal dollars. Through the strong leadership of Councilmembers Michael Brown and Tommy Wells and the unanimous support by the entire Council for the introduction of the Food Stamp Expansion Act, we can achieve this goal by passing the Act.

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<sup>1</sup> Total food stamp benefit funding to the District in FY 08 was \$112,324,800, or \$9,360,400 monthly.

<sup>2</sup> Economists estimate that every \$1 in food stamps generates \$1.73 in local economic activity.

<sup>3</sup> This is a conservative estimate, based on a 13.6% increase to the average monthly per person benefit (\$104.65), multiplied by current participation (101,284), multiplied by 12.

Categorical eligibility and Heat and Eat will truly make a difference for many low-income families in the District. Over the last few months, D.C. Hunger Solutions, in partnership with Capital Area Asset Builders, has conducted joint outreach at free tax preparation sites, connecting tax clients with multiple benefits – the Earned Income Tax Credit and food stamps – in one stop. We have heard from many tax clients who would benefit from one or both of these food stamp policy changes. On an average night at the Martin Luther King Library tax site, speaking to 15 to 20 tax clients, usually 1 to 2 households were ineligible for food stamps under current rules but would become eligible if Council lifted the income limit to 200 percent of poverty, as called for under Categorical Eligibility. Says Ms. Thomas<sup>4</sup>, who works a temp job bringing in \$1580 a month, “everything is going up too much.” She incurs significant rent and child care costs, but at 135 percent of the poverty level, just misses being eligible for food stamps due to her gross income exceeding the 130 federal poverty level gross income threshold.

Heat and Eat would further strengthen the Food Stamp Program by expanding benefits for low-income families, seniors, and persons with disabilities. Mr. Miller, a resident of NE, receives disability payments of \$980, but pays the vast majority of that in rent (\$800). Left with only \$180 a month to cover all his costs, life has been a struggle. With the stimulus boost, he is now receiving \$70 monthly in food stamp benefits – which has provided crucial assistance during these tough times.

But as you know, \$70 certainly wouldn't get most of us to the end of the month and it doesn't work for Mr. Miller either. With Heat and Eat, Mr. Miller would receive the highest standard utility allowance, and his benefit would go up by about \$50. This means \$120 per month to purchase groceries, or around \$600 more annually in food stamp benefits.

As these residents' stories portray, D.C. Council has the opportunity today both to make a difference for District families who are facing this bleak economy, and also draw in federal funding to fight hunger in our city. We encourage and support the Council's efforts and thank you for your time, energy, and leadership in developing this important legislation.

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<sup>4</sup> The names in this testimony have been changed for to protect individuals' privacy

**Respectfully submitted:**

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