

Testimony of

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Agency Performance Oversight Hearing on Fiscal Year 2008-2009 Budgets

Department of Human Services

Committee on Human Services

Council of the District of Columbia

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Chairman Wells 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, thereby improving the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income District residents.

I am here to testify on the importance of the District's Food Stamp Program in these hard economic times, and to encourage the Committee to ensure that the Income Maintenance Administration can help every eligible family benefit from food stamps.

Over the past year, IMA has begun major changes to improve the Food Stamp Program, including transitioning to 12 month certification periods so clients must re-apply less often for

their benefits, and moving to center-based rather than caseworker-based services. These changes allow customers to more easily access and stay connected to critical nutrition assistance.

The need to continue to strengthen the Food Stamp Program in the upcoming year is great.

Preliminary numbers show food stamp participation in the District to be up from around 90,000 customers in November of 2007 to nearly 98,000 customers in October of 2008 – a nearly 9 percent increase. I have talked with more and more residents who wait on-edge for their food stamp benefits to be inputted each month. Said one customer: “I just want to feed my kids.”

This sentence sums up the reality for many D.C. residents in hard times.

Beyond the direct in-pocket benefit for low-income District customers, food stamps are also a major economic stimulus into our community. Each dollar of federal food stamp benefits flowing into a local economy generates about double that in economic activity. Not only that, but food stamp benefits are one hundred percent federally funded, with states bearing about fifty percent of administrative costs. The American Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Act includes millions of federal dollars to bolster the District’s Food Stamp Program (recently renamed as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program “SNAP”) by:

- Boosting the monthly food stamp/SNAP allotment by 13.6 percent (the increase phases in over time)
- Helping with the administrative cost of growing caseloads

One key step the District can take is to provide adequate local administrative funding for IMA to staff the growing caseload and reprogram computer systems to ensure that all eligible residents get their federally-funded benefit increases immediately.

The District should conduct food stamp outreach and adopt available food stamp policy options to help more struggling households access the program while bringing in millions of additional federal dollars to stimulate the economy. We greatly appreciate the efforts of Council members Wells and Brown in championing these policies and working with the Income Maintenance Administration to implement one key policy option, categorical eligibility, beginning in October 2009. Categorical eligibility raises the gross income limit for food stamps and lifts the asset cap. By eliminating the asset cap, this policy will protect people who lose their jobs in this unstable economy from having to spend down almost all of their savings to feed their families before they can be considered eligible for food stamps. By raising the arbitrary gross income limit of 130 percent to 200 percent of the federal poverty level, "Cat El" will help working households with high housing or child care costs access the program.

Especially in these hard economic times, we need to employ all means available to strengthen the Food Stamp Program, thereby supporting low-income families, boosting the economy, and drawing down additional federal funding. Adopting available food stamp policy options, conducting food stamp outreach, and supporting the Income Maintenance Administration with local administrative funding are key steps to accomplish this goal.