

**Testimony of
Alexandra M. Ashbrook, Director, D.C. Hunger Solutions**

**Oversight Hearing
Department of Health**

**Council of the District of Columbia
Council Chambers
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20004**

February 27, 2009

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I am Alexandra Ashbrook and I direct D.C. Hunger Solutions, an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center. D.C. Hunger Solutions works to end hunger and improve nutrition by promoting the health, economic security, and well-being of all District residents.

This Committee knows *all* too well the health issues facing the District – high rates of under-nutrition, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Unfortunately, the District has the largest percentage of overweight children among states, with 23 percent of its children classified as overweight. While the obesity epidemic disproportionately impacts minority groups (8 percent of white D.C. residents are obese; while 31 percent of African-American residents are obese) and low-income areas of the city (Ward 8 has an adult obesity rate of 39.6 percent while Ward 3's rate is 7.9 percent), obesity is a city-wide epidemic – with devastating short-term and long-term consequences. Together, we must craft a coordinated city-wide response.

In the past year, the Department of Health has ramped up its efforts by assuming a leadership role in addressing the city's obesity epidemic – an epidemic intrinsically linked to hunger and poverty. Thanks to \$600,000 in Fiscal Year 2009 funding made possible with the Council's support – in particular, that of Council Chairman Gray, Councilmember and Chairman of the Committee on Health Catania, Councilmember Wells, and others -- the Department of Health was able to pursue and promote key activities to reduce obesity and promote healthy eating and active living. FY 2009 funding supported:

- D.C. Hunger Solutions' *Healthy Corner Store Program* (Wards 7-8)
- Healthy Solutions' *D.C. Produce Co-Op* (Wards 7-8)
- Gaston and Porter Wellness Improvement Center's *Sister Circles Program*
- SHIRE's early childhood model, *I am Moving, I am Learning*
- Unity's clinic-based model of *WE Can (Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition)*
- United Way's Child Wellness capacity-building mini-grants, which will be doubled thanks to a United Way match (\$100,000 in funding was leveraged to \$200,000)
- Advocates for Children's Diets assistance developing an *Obesity State Plan*.

Additionally, the Department of Health's anti-obesity leaders – Dr. Carlos Canos, Dr. Nathaniel Beers, Joni Eisenberg, and Michele Tingling-Clemmons –are integral members

of the District's Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities Team funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This team is working to catalyze citizen energy to tackle the obesity epidemic and promote promising policies such as:

- 1) the implementation and enforcement of policies that will increase the safety and accessibility of D.C. parks and recreation centers;
- 2) the initiation of an Afterschool Supper Program to provide low-income children in child care when parents work long or nontraditional hours with healthy suppers as well as accompanying improvements to existing afterschool nutrition programs;
- 3) the creation of a saturation index of unhealthy food and beverage vendors, with the opportunity for community residents to identify the types and quantities of healthy vendors that should exist instead in Wards 7 and 8; and
- 4) the creation of policies to foster community-based fitness and healthy living programs.

The Department of Health's commitment in terms of funding and staff time must be sustained if we are to address the health problems fueled by three inter-related conditions: poverty, hunger, and lack of access to healthy, affordable food.

In addition to supporting continued efforts by the Department of Health, the District can take specific action to promote health and end hunger by supporting the Fresh Food Opportunities Bank, a recommendation of the Fair Budget Coalition (FBC). The FBC is a group that brings together more than 65 human and legal services providers, consumers, advocates, faith organizations, and concerned community members to advocate for a comprehensive, integrated and adequately funded approach to meeting the human needs of all residents of the District of Columbia, particularly those with low and no income.

Creation of a \$1 million Fresh Food Opportunities Bank will fund:

- Outreach to increase participation in federal nutrition programs, which will allow the District to tap into in millions of dollars in available federal funds, stimulate the local economy, and expand low-income residents' buying power;
- Grants to local non-profits, small businesses, and micro-enterprises to improve access to affordable, healthy food; and
- Improved coordination of anti-hunger and nutrition efforts to develop a city-wide hunger and obesity strategy and to ensure that city agencies capitalize on District and federal funding.

As we move forward, we ask for your continued support of the D.C. Department of Health and its work to promote healthy eating and active living. I appreciate this opportunity to testify.

Submitted by:

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