

Testimony of

**Alexandra Ashbrook
Director, D.C. Hunger Solutions**

Agency Performance Oversight Hearing on Fiscal Year 2009-2010

Department of Human Services

Committee on Human Services

Council of the District of Columbia

February 2010

**Council Chambers
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Room 412
Washington, DC 20004**

Chairman Wells and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today about the District's Food Stamp Program, which has provided a lifeline for the more than 112,000 District residents depending on food stamp benefits to put food on the table during this terrible recession, marked by record unemployment. My name is Alex Ashbrook and I am the director of D.C. Hunger Solutions, an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center. D.C. Hunger Solutions works to create a hunger-free community and improve the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income District residents.

Families in the District of Columbia are facing challenges that many of us cannot even imagine. A new report¹ from the Food Research and Action Center finds that one in five households in the District *was not* able to afford the food they needed in 2008-2009. The number is even worse when you look at children: the rate for households with children is [was?] a shocking 40.6 percent, which unfortunately is

¹The [Food Hardship: A Closer Look at Hunger - Data for the Nation, States, 100 MSAs, and Every Congressional District](http://www.frac.org/pdf/food_hardship_report_2010.pdf) is available at: http://www.frac.org/pdf/food_hardship_report_2010.pdf.

the highest rate among states. These dire statistics stress the urgency of connecting every eligible family to the most robust food stamp benefit allowable in the District as swiftly and easily as possible.

The Income Maintenance Administration deserves credit for its improved administration of the Food Stamp/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The Program has moved from being ineligible for bonuses because of quality control liability in Fiscal Year 2007 to garnering two U.S. Department of Agriculture bonus awards, totaling approximately \$800,000 in September of 2009 for Fiscal Year 2008: one for its timely processing of FS/SNAP applications and the other for best program access. These bonus awards, along with \$1.4 million contained in the FY 2010 Defense Appropriations Bill (P.L. 111-118), should be invested in the administration of the District's Food Stamp Program.

The need to continue to strengthen the Food Stamp Program in the upcoming year is urgent. Despite IMA's agreement to implement the Food Stamp Expansion Act by October 1, 2009, it has failed to do so and this delay has meant that thousands of District low-income workers who have incomes between 130 and 200 percent of the federal poverty line (or annual incomes for a family of three between \$23,809 and \$35,000), minimal assets, and high housing and child care costs have not been able to get desperately needed nutrition assistance. And thousands of families have not seen their benefits rise because Heat and Eat has not been implemented. Struggling families cannot afford to wait any longer.

With unprecedented food stamp increases, the District's IMA, like local benefit offices around the country, is struggling to provide adequate customer service. In particular, during this time of unprecedented need, the full support of Council is critical to helping IMA connect all eligible residents to their federally-funded benefits in a timely manner. Of key importance is the role Council can play in ensuring that DHS:

- Uses all available federal revenue streams to support the administration of FS/SNAP.

- receives adequate local administrative funding to address the elimination of 99 eligibility determination services positions – 72 in the FY 2009 budget and 27 in the FY 2010 budget.
- adopts and implements permissible policies to streamline program administration and maximize benefit levels.

I have attached an Appendix detailing strategies that will help IMA reduce caseworker workload and connect eligible families to FS/SNAP as swiftly and as easily as possible.

Investing in the Food Stamp Program is a wise choice especially during these tough times. Beyond the direct in-pocket benefit for low-income District families, food stamps are also a major economic stimulus. Each dollar of federal food stamp benefits flowing into a local economy generates about \$1.81 in economic activity. Food stamp benefits are one hundred percent federally funded, with states bearing about fifty percent of administrative costs.

D.C. Hunger Solutions greatly appreciates the efforts of the Council, in particular Councilmembers Tommy Wells and Michael Brown, in championing the importance of the District's Food Stamp Program.

Respectfully submitted,

Alexandra Ashbrook
Director
D.C. Hunger Solutions
1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 540
Washington, D.C. 20009
aashbrook@dchunger.org 202.986.2200 x 3019

Attachment: Appendix A