



**Testimony of Alexandra Ashbrook, Director**

**D.C. Hunger Solutions**

**District of Columbia Office on Aging**

**COUNCILMEMBER ANITA BONDS, CHAIRPERSON**

**COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

**Thursday, February 12, 2015**

**11:00 a.m., Room 412, John A. Wilson Building**

**1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20004**

**Oversight Hearing**

My name is Alexandra Ashbrook and I direct 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 health, nutrition, well-being, and economic security of residents of the nation's capital.

Too many seniors struggle to put food on the table. Hunger and poverty are significant concerns in the District of Columbia, especially among District seniors, who comprise close to 20 percent of the D.C. population. 26 percent of District residents 65 and older fell below 100 percent of the federal poverty line and 37 percent fell below 200 percent of the federal poverty line. According to the National Foundation to End Senior Hunger, more than 15 percent of seniors in the District faced the threat of hunger in 2012.

Getting enough food, especially health-sustaining food, is important to everyone, but it is especially important when people are particularly vulnerable to disease, or when their life circumstances – such as limited mobility – make obtaining a healthy diet more difficult. The impact of senior hunger extends well beyond an empty stomach. Food insecurity often co-exists with lower nutrient intakes, greater likelihood of mental health problems, decreased resistance to infection, increased levels of depression, diabetes, and limitations on activities of daily living. Food insecure seniors are more than twice as likely to report fair or poor health status.

As a member of the Senior Advisory Coalition and the chair of its nutrition work group, D.C. Hunger Solutions works to address senior hunger with a focus on championing the city's wisest use of key senior nutrition programs: congregate meals, home delivered meals, the commodity supplemental food program, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program/SNAP. Together, these programs reach more than approximately 25,000 seniors, connecting them to nutritious foods, socialization opportunities, and doorways to other resources. All these programs save for SNAP are housed at the D.C. Office on Aging.

The federal nutrition programs are proven effective solutions to combat food insecurity and hunger in good times and bad. By providing District seniors with federally-funded meals or benefits to purchase food, these programs not only reduce food insecurity and hunger, but also improve nutrition, health, economic security, and overall health and well-being. There are four key nutrition programs that help seniors access the healthy food they need:

- *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/Food Stamps)* – SNAP is widely considered the nation's number one defense against hunger. SNAP allows seniors to shop for diet-appropriate foods at a range of grocery and corner stores and farmers' markets; and supplements fixed incomes by providing relief from rising food costs. In the District, more than 14,000 seniors benefit from SNAP, but thousands more are eligible. With an average monthly benefit of \$119 for seniors residing alone, SNAP brings in more than \$14 million in federal dollars for D.C. seniors to spend on needed groceries.
- *Home-Delivered Meals Program* - The Home-Delivered Meals Program works with lead D.C. senior agencies to deliver meals to more than 1,400 older District residents, regardless of income. With the additional \$1.9 million in local funding included for FY2014 and proposed for FY2015– both of which we advocated for -- this program is reaching even more seniors but concerns arise from a wait-list off approximately 300 potentially eligible seniors.
- *Congregate Meal Program* - The Congregate Meal Program offers 5,000 District residents aged 60 and over a free daily meal Monday through Friday at 43 senior centers. Meals are served in group settings to allow for socialization, with other services, such as transportation, counseling, and recreation opportunities.
- *Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)* – Through CSFP, 6,000 low-income District seniors are provided with a bag of groceries filled with federal commodities like rice, beans, canned fruits and vegetables, and cereal each month.

The agency, under the leadership of Dr. John Thompson, is committed to addressing senior hunger through its programs and collaboration. Of note:

- **The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP):** Now in its third year of administering CSFP through a partnership with the Capital Area Food Bank, DCOA has adopted some policy enhancements that have made it easier for low-income seniors to access CSFP. The enhancements include a more simplified application form and process, a less onerous recertification process, and the inclusion of fresh produce at selected sites. Moving forward, DCOA should continue to support efforts to co-locate CSFP sites at all the senior wellness centers and explore providing transportation for seniors to retrieve their monthly CSFP packages.
- **Congregate Meals:** With 53 sites spread throughout the city, the congregate meal program provides nutritious meals to seniors as well as opportunities to socialize and engage in valuable programming.

Dr. Thompson's team has introduced popular salad bars at many sites with plans to expand. Additionally, SAC's nutrition group is assessing opportunities to further improve the nutrition of the meals provided at these sites and looks forward to working with SAC and DCOA on this assessment.

- **Collaboration:** The Agency readily participates in trainings and attends meetings to discuss senior hunger. D.C. Hunger Solutions and DCOA have been partnering to improve DCOA's website, in-take forms, and communications to better promote the range of nutrition programs available to seniors rather than those chiefly administered by DCOA. To enhance its capacity to promote and connect eligible seniors to SNAP, DCOA championed the deployment of a DC Department of Human Services SNAP and Medicaid expert to help assist seniors at the main ADRC location. (Sample senior rack cards included.)

An area of concern is the growing wait-list for the **home-delivered meal program**. During FY 2014, thanks to a continued allocation of \$1.9 million in local funding, DCOA took proactive, transparent steps to eliminate the waitlist that impacted over 200 particularly vulnerable seniors. For a time, there was no waitlist for home-delivered meals. Unfortunately, the infusion of local funding has not sufficed to address the need for these nutritious meals—today, the waitlist is close to 300 potentially eligible seniors. (See attached letter of January 9<sup>th</sup> to Mayor Bowser on behalf of the Senior Advisory Coalition.)

To address this crisis, DCOA has asked that lead agencies conduct assessments to identify if wait-listed seniors will meet new, stricter eligibility requirements for the program and are most in need of services. These new requirements were imposed without opportunity for community input and lead agencies were tasked with conducting assessments – without additional resources. The need to conduct assessments of wait-listed seniors also represents a departure from former operations where wait-listed seniors were only assessed once slots became available. Moving forward, DCOA has indicated that it will take two welcome steps: 1) providing DCOA staff to help conduct assessments of seniors on the waitlist; and 2) convening a taskforce to help shape new policies for HDM of which D.C. Hunger Solutions looks forward to being a member of.

Getting enough food, especially health-sustaining food, is important to everyone, but it is especially important when people are particularly vulnerable to disease, or when their life circumstances – such as limited mobility – make obtaining a healthy diet more difficult. D.C. Hunger Solutions looks forward to working with DCOA to ensure that no senior worries about getting a meal.

Respectfully submitted:



Alexandra Ashbrook, Director