

**Testimony of Alexandra Ashbrook, Director  
D.C. Hunger Solutions  
Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee on Transportation and the Environment  
Committee Chair, Mary Cheh  
Public Oversight Hearing on  
Department of Parks and Recreation  
District Department of the Environment  
Wednesday, February 18, 2015**

I am Alexandra Ashbrook, Director of D.C. Hunger Solutions. Our mission is to create a hunger-free community and improve the health, nutrition, economic security, and well-being of D.C. residents. D.C. Hunger Solutions is an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center.

Nearly one out of seven families that struggle with hunger. Low-income Washingtonians of every type – children and parents in working families, unemployed adults, seniors, people with disabilities, and others – have suffered setback after setback since the start of the recession in 2008. Even before the recession, of course, stagnant wages, squeezes on public programs, rising costs for medical care, and growing inequality had made life harder and harder for tens of millions.

One of the few bright spots in this picture has been the District's use of the federal nutrition programs which are uniquely positioned to respond in hard times. Each of the major federal nutrition programs – SNAP (food stamps), WIC, school lunch, school breakfast, afterschool nutrition, summer food and child care food – is an entitlement, except for WIC. That means there is no fixed cap on beneficiaries or spending, and the caseload and benefit levels can grow as more people become eligible or need more help.

The role of the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation in reaching more children and teens with these benefits is profoundly important. DPR's efforts to implement the out-of-school time nutrition programs (summer food and afterschool food) has helped attract hungry children to school-based and community-based programs that keep them safe, active, learning and engaged, provide positive activities, and improve nutritional intake.

**D.C. Free Summer Meal Program:** Thanks to DPR's stewardship of the D.C. Free Summer Meals lead by Mark McCain and his team, the city has consistently ranked number one among states for connecting low-income children to summer meals. In Summer 2013 (the most recent data available), the District of Columbia provided

summer lunch to 60 low-income children for every 100 who ate lunch during the school year – the best ratio in the country.

With its sponsorship of more than 200 sites each summer, DPR's commitment to the success of the summer meal program has ensured that thousands of children access nutritious meals each day when school lets out for the summer. In summer 2014, 20 DPR sponsored sites offered meals on Saturdays, including a basketball program for teens that served 300 lunches each Saturday.

DPR has also worked hard to improve the food served by this program so that it complies with the higher nutrition standards of the Healthy Schools Act. While these meal improvements mean that more children are enjoying healthier meals, DPR has also had to pay more per each meal leaving less federal funding for summer meal monitors, outreach, and promotion.

In summer 2014, with citywide outreach to connect children and teens to open meal sites, there were occasions when families would go to sites only to be informed that no meals were available. In order to guarantee that meals will be available for hungry children and teens, D.C. Hunger Solutions suggests that DPR purchase shelf-stable reimbursable meals and distribute a certain number at the beginning of the summer to targeted recreation centers.

One key strength of the Summer Meal program is that it comes with federal entitlement funding that can grow to meet increased need. Even so, a sponsor such as DPR needs to have available funding to cover the up-front costs of meals and staff and outreach. In the past, D.C. Free Summer Meal costs have been reimbursed with federal funds but the District needs to ensure that DPR has sufficient funding available in its budget to pay for up-front costs while waiting to be reimbursed through federal funds.

Moving forward, it is critical that DPR have enough flexibility in its budget to ensure:

- the promotion of summer meals;
- the hiring of sufficient summer meal monitors;
- the sponsoring of any eligible site that needs help feeding children; and
- the purchase of reimbursable meals.

**The Afterschool Meal Program:** To build on the success of summer meals and fill the hunger gap, DPR began serving suppers – through the federal Afterschool Meal Program—at eight centers during the school year in 2012 thanks to a partnership with the Capital Area Food Bank. Through this continued partnership with the Capital , the program has expanded incrementally and now reaches 14 recreation centers with a reach of 350 children and teens each day. Despite the addition of six sites, incremental growth will not meet the critical need of providing large scale services to the growing population of children and teens qualifying for free and reduced meals. Given that any future program growth will be dependent on the

Capital Area Food Bank greatly expanding its budget and allocating all of its expansion to DPR, this year D.C. Hunger Solutions, the Capital Area Food Bank, and DPR leadership held preliminary discussions about whether DPR should take over the program or a portion of it in-house. I look forward to supporting the creation of a DPR strategic plan that weighs the pros and cons of expanding this program to not only feed more children and teens, but also attract them to quality programming.

In closing, our partnership with DPR that prioritizes the use and expansion of key federal nutrition programs has helped the District connect thousands of children and teens to healthy food and drawn in millions of dollars in federal funding. Even so, we need to do even more to ensure that every hungry child has access year round to a healthy meal.