



**COUNCILMEMBER YVETTE ALEXANDER, CHAIRPERSON**

**COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**

**PUBLIC OVERSIGHT HEARING ON**

**“THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES”**

**March 12, 2015, 10:00 a.m.**

**Testimony of Alexandra Ashbrook, Director**

**D.C. Hunger Solutions**

I am Alexandra Ashbrook, 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.

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. In DC, the recession is far from over with un- and under-employment, squeezes on public programs, rising costs for food and housing, and growing inequality making life harder and harder for thousands of D.C. residents.

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 D.C. Department of Human Services administers the most far-reaching of these federal nutrition programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as Food Stamps). The benefits of SNAP for nutrition, health and well-being also are sweeping – increasing food security and improving dietary intake and health (especially among children). SNAP benefits also create markets, economic growth and jobs in urban, suburban and rural communities – at grocers, farmers’ markets, manufacturers and farms. And SNAP significantly reduces poverty as well. In 2013 SNAP benefits lifted more than five million people (2.1 million of them children) above the federal poverty line – up from 4.6 million two years earlier.

The Department of Human Services' administration of and commitment of city leaders to SNAP has been a bright spot in connecting more than 140,000 residents each month to benefits and mitigating the impact of devastating recent cuts to SNAP benefits at the federal level.<sup>i</sup> To help our most vulnerable residents, stimulate the local economy, and streamline DHS program administration, city leaders took several key actions to protect and strengthen SNAP:

**Protecting the estimated 60,000 Heat and Eat households in D.C. from devastating heat and eat Farm Bill cuts:** Under the 2014 Farm Bill, targeted SNAP households now need to receive \$20 per year in LIHEAP funding; instead of \$1. To comply with the new Farm Bill, the District took action and allocated \$1.2 million in LIHEAP funds for approximate 60,000 households who had been receiving the heat and eat benefit.<sup>ii</sup> It is critical the DC maintain this funding moving forward and ensure that SNAP customers are receiving the heat and eat benefit within 30 days of their approval.

**Raising the minimum SNAP benefit to \$30 per month:** D.C. Hunger Solutions, supported by the Senior Advisory Coalition and the D.C. Fair Budget Coalition, worked with the D.C. Council to pass and fully fund the SNAP Expansion Act of 2014. As a result, \$1.3 million in FY2015 local funds were designated for a local nutrition benefit to ensure no one in D.C. receives less than \$30 per month in SNAP-like benefits. About 8,000 residents - many of them seniors- currently get less than \$30 a month and more than half of these residents only get \$16 per month. Unfortunately, this legislation has not yet been implemented.

**Partnering with the community to conduct SNAP outreach:** As an organizational member of the state outreach plan, D.C. Hunger Solutions appreciates its partnership with DHS that facilitated our work to leverage federal dollars for the following work in FY2014:

- Prescreening 1,453 low-income residents for SNAP;
- Assisting more than 1,000 residents with SNAP applications or mid- or re-certification requirements;
- Conducting eight SNAP outreach trainings to representatives of 20 social service agencies;
- Distributing 7,782 SNAP outreach materials;
- Conducting SNAP outreach at 11 community events; and
- Disseminating SNAP information, including best practices, application tips, and USDA materials, to our partners across the District.

Despite this good news, there are several areas of concern that demand action by the Department:

- 1) **Corrective action to address customer service problems like unanswered telephones, difficulties scheduling phone interviews, long waits at service centers, and continued delays in creating the on-line application for SNAP.** Customers should not be deterred or frustrated when they apply or re-certify for SNAP, a critical benefit. The budget should ensure that DHS has sufficient staff and infrastructure to help customers in critical need of basic resources. I encourage the agency to participate in Grade.DC.Gov and otherwise actively solicit feedback from its clients so that they may reward excellent customer service and take corrective actions to improve services.
- 2) **More coordination with local employment and training funding streams and non-profits to leverage more federal SNAP Employment and Training dollars:** With continued un- and under-employment and the threat that the ABWD waiver may be rescinded, it is critical that D.C. invest in expanding, evidence-based employment and training programs and leverages this expansion through SNAP E&T dollars.

Beyond the direct in-pocket benefit for low-income District families, SNAP is also a major economic stimulus. Each dollar of federal food stamp benefits flowing into a local economy generates about \$1.79 in economic activity. Investing in SNAP and DHS's administration of the program is a wise choice for the city.

Respectfully submitted:

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<sup>i</sup> First, with the November 2013, premature end to the SNAP American Recovery and Reinvestment Act boost, D.C. residents lost about \$15 million in SNAP purchasing power in 2014. Second, the passage of the Farm Bill in 2014 undercut Heat and Eat policies in 16 states and Washington, D.C, and threatened that 850,000 households could lose on average \$90 per month in SNAP benefits.

<sup>ii</sup> Under the D.C. Food Stamp Expansion Act of 2009, D.C. has been implementing the Heat and Eat policy for three years. According to DHS about 60,000 households receive a minimal LIHEAP benefit of \$1 which allows these households to claim the maximum standard utility allowance. Since SNAP benefits are based on a household's net income (gross income minus allowable expenses for work, dependent care, housing, utilities, etc.), this policy helps residents receive a higher SNAP benefit, a benefit that is 100 percent federally funded.