

National Hunger Commission on Hunger

June 15, 2015 – Oakland, CA

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Good morning commissioners. I'm honored to speak to you today concerning hunger, as an expert – both because I have worked for nearly two decades in the anti-hunger community and because I have experienced hunger first hand as a child and young adult.

I grew up here in Northern California, where my family has lived for generations. My parents both raised in working class homes, had their own working class status and middle class aspirations undermined by my father's untreated mental health disorder. He suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which he was diagnosed with prior to his honorable discharge from the Army. He served as an operating engineer in Vietnam, clearing landing zones. Upon discharge he was not given a follow-up appointment or even instructions for how to taper down the lithium that they had prescribed him while in Vietnam. My father self-medicated with alcohol and, for most of my childhood, he was suicidal and at times homicidal, and could rarely hold down a job for more than a year. My home was not a safe place and hunger was not the only trauma that we experienced. We moved frequently and so rarely built up a support network. To get by, my mother borrowed money that she could never pay back and when I was 13, she left her job as a bookkeeper to work from home ironing shirts for piecemeal wages and, as a family, we sold junk at the flea market on the weekends.

During the hardest years, we relied on the USDA commodity food program run by the Salvation Army in our small rural town. But it was run by volunteers and so the hours weren't dependable and the food, though sometimes the only food we had at the end of the month, was never enough to offer a balanced meal.

My family didn't know about the school meal program and so, until I was 15, we didn't participate. While school cafeteria food was (and still is) the bane of many jokes, I remember coveting the meals the other children would eat. Then one day, I was sent to the principle for arguing with a teacher who had insisted that I purchase a \$10 workbook for my French class. The vice-principle asked why I wasn't on the free meal program. To this day, I'll never forget the mix of relief and affliction when I learned about the program. That wasn't the first time I was sent to the principal's office, but it was the last – it was also the first year I got straight As – a GPA that helped me earn a Cal-Grant, Pell Grant and a Federal Supplementary Educational Opportunity Grant and full ride to Mills College which included a meal plan. It was with this education that I earned the skills to help my dad apply for veteran's benefits – so he could get the mental health and financial support that eventually ended homeless for my family.

The angst I still have remembering all the hungry days I spent not knowing that there had been a lunch with my name has driven a great deal of my professional work, which includes building a statewide network of outreach workers based at food banks, call centers, catholic charities and other community based organizations to let people know about federal food assistance they are eligible to receive and assist them in applying for it.

I believe that one of the most important accomplishments that this Commission can have is to lift up the problem of hunger and the stories of Americans who have been hungry, not just in the distant past as I have, but who are experiencing it today. I know that you, Commissioner Chilton, know the power of this goal achieved through your work with the National Witnesses to Hunger, not just to inspire, but to instruct policy change that is meaningful and lasting. I am grateful that today's agenda will achieve that goal and am thankful to you both for making sure it did.

As I enumerate my policy recommendations below, I need to say that they have been formulated with the belief that the goal of the Commission, to reduce the experience of low-food-security, is a bar set to low. Too low for America – and the freedoms my father fought for. Instead, I posit that we should seek to eradicate, not

just chronic hunger, but hunger. To do this, leaders must take immediate actions in response to America's [stagnant poverty](#) and [dangerously high levels of inequality](#), restore confidence in our country's ability to protect our most vulnerable citizens, and make prosperity an achievable goal for all Americans. We recommend doing this by:

I. Making employment a real option for every low-income American and protect families who can't work.

Most poor families with working-aged adults are working families. Still, over [2.5 Million Americans](#) are among the long-term unemployed. [The Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment and Training Act](#) will put Americans back to work rebuilding our Nation's crumbling infrastructure and support worker retraining for a 21st Century economy. Passage of this legislation, coupled with a doubled-down investment in work opportunity through youth jobs programs and subsidized jobs for low-income families who rely on the [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\) Program](#), will make self-reliant employment an option most working-aged Americans. And when unemployment is not available, long-term unemployment insurance should and a safety net that keeps [children safe from the significant and long-lasting harm of deep poverty](#) must be.

II. Increasing and indexing the minimum wage so that an honest day's work can bring an honest day's pay.

With a [proliferation of low-wage work](#), over 25 percent of jobs in the nation pay less than the [federal poverty line](#) for a family of four. Here in California, 64% of low-income people live in a working family. Increasing the minimum wage achieves the twin goals of maintaining a wage floor to keep workers out of poverty, and stimulating the consumer spending necessary for economic recovery and future growth. In a [study](#) conducted by the Chicago Federal Reserve Bank, a one dollar increase in the minimum wage for a worker resulted in \$2,800 in new consumer spending by his or her household over the following year. America should seek to restore the full purchasing power of the minimum wage, [which would be \\$21.72 an hour if it had kept pace with worker productivity](#), to guarantee each worker a decent standard of living, reduce the reliance of government safety-net programs and infuse our economy with more confident consumers. The [Original Living Wage Act of 2015](#) would require workers to be paid a minimum wage that would allow a full-time worker to earn wages that are higher than the federal poverty threshold for a four-person household.

III. Establishing the right of all workers to have paid sick days and dependable schedules.

In addition to raising wages, low-income workers need workplace protections, like paid sick days and schedule fairness, to prevent poverty. Though paid sick time is considered by most Americans to be "[a basic worker's right](#)," more than [40 percent](#) of people in the private sector workforce, including [81 percent](#) of low-wage workers, don't receive a single [paid sick day](#). For low-income, working families this is especially critical, since a [few days' lost pay](#) makes the struggle to secure basic needs, like food, that much harder. Even worse, nearly [25 percent of workers polled](#) said that they've lost a job or were told they'd lose a job for taking time off to due to illness. Congress should pass the federal [Healthy Families Act](#) allowing most workers to earn up to seven paid sick days annually. Additionally, federal law makers should support the [Schedules That Work Act](#) that establishes [protections for workers who are undermined by no voluntary part-time employment and unpredictable schedules](#) which negatively impacts women and Black and Latino workers most.

VI. Supporting Paid Family Leave so that workers can care for or ill family member without losing their job.

Only 11 percent of workers in the U.S. have access to paid family leave through their employers. [A recent study](#) found that women who take paid leave are 39 percent less likely to receive public assistance and 40 percent less likely to receive food stamps in the year following a child's birth. Congress should enact [The Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act](#) to secure up to 12 weeks of paid leave each year to qualifying workers for the birth or adoption of a new child, the serious illness of an immediate family member.

V. Making safe, affordable child care an option for every working parent and their children.

According to [Child Care Aware](#), the average cost of enrolling an infant in a full-time day care center ranges from \$5,496 in Mississippi to \$16,459 annually per child depending on the state, yet the [National Women's Law Center \(NWLC\)](#) says that only [one in six](#) children who qualify for federal childcare assistance currently receive it. Research shows that low-income mothers who receive childcare subsidies are more likely to be employed, work more hours, and work standard schedules compared to mothers without subsidies. This means fewer families with children will need to rely on federal food assistance to feed their families or be

forced to go without food because their paycheck doesn't last the month. Congress should restore full funding the [Childcare and Development Block Grant \(CCDBC\)](#), permanently end the [national sequester of Head Start funds](#) and authorize significant new funds with the passage of the [Strong Start for America's Children Act](#) to ensure early-learning settings they need and deserve, and parents are able to work and ensure that as we build out the workforce of child care workers, that we commit to ensuring that they are paid well enough that they, themselves, are not poor and vulnerable to chronic hunger.

VI. Securing safe, affordable housing an option for all Americans.

Too many Americans are homeless and most pay more than 30% of their incomes in housing. In the wake of the mortgage crisis, [rental housing availability dropped to an all-time low](#). Federal Community Development Block Grant funding cuts in the 2012 budget and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding sequestration has magnified the impact of the rental housing shortage. Meanwhile, according to the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#), more than half of federal spending on housing supports went to families with incomes above \$100,000 in 2011. By redirecting housing investments to housing supports for low-income Americans, ending sequester and restoring the roughly 70,000 vouchers lost during sequestration and implementing a National [renter's tax credit](#), housing instability could be sharply reduced, [family resources for food & health freed up](#) and the quality of life for all Americans improved.

VII. Preventing long-lasting harm of children & adults living in poverty by strengthening SNAP.

There is no goal more American than ending hunger and no program better at achieving that goal than the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In a [poll](#) commissioned by Tyson Foods and the [Food Research and Action Center \(FRAC\)](#), 80 percent of respondents said they "strongly agree" with the statement that no one should go hungry in America. Still, [more than 16 million](#) children live with the possibility of hunger each day. Hunger has a tremendous impact on young children's health, future potential, and cognitive, social and emotional development. Americans shouldn't have to rely on food stamps to prevent hunger, but when they do, the benefit should suffice. However, according to a [report released by the National Institute of Medicine](#), the current SNAP benefit levels are set too low to ensure adequate access to healthy food. To reduce the likelihood that Americans will suffer from hunger and prevent the long-lasting consequences of childhood malnutrition, Congress should set SNAP benefits using the Department of Agriculture's [Low-Cost Food Plan](#) and restore eligibility to immigrants cut by [The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 \(PRWORA\)](#).

I would like to close on a personal note – as I began. To make sure that the benefits we have allocated already through these programs are utilized, we need to fund outreach in all of our nutrition programs and allow alternative delivery strategies where traditional methods aren't working (like expanding [Summer Lunch EBT projects](#)) - so that kids can eat the meal that has their name on it rather than go hungry. And, though these would be small investments, it would be meaningful to me if we were to pass legislation to improve SNAP access to [Veteran Families](#) and [Military families](#) – because if we can't prevent hunger among those families who have already given so much to our country – then I'm not sure what America really stands for.

By pursuing these priorities with urgency and to commit to follow them with more robust reforms to reduce poverty, inequality and human suffering including, but not limited to, fully implementing the Affordable Care Act, creating a path to citizenship for immigrants, reforming prison sentencing, fully funding veteran health, home care and employment re-training programs, restoring of the promise of quality public education and strengthening the rights of workers to organize and collectively bargain for fair wages and safe working conditions. These policy next steps should be identified by people who are, or who have experienced the indignity of hunger and poverty. They should be policy goals that, taken together, will not only significantly reduce the experience of hunger, but also elevate the dignity of all Americans and secure the possibility of economic prosperity for low-income and middle-class Americans.