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FIELD HEARING TO EXAMINE FEDERAL FOOD AND NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

FIELD HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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FIELD HEARING TO EXAMINE FEDERAL FOOD AND NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Tuesday, April 10, 2007

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY,
Atlanta, Georgia

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10 a.m., at the Atlanta Community Food Bank, Hon. Saxby Chambliss, presiding.

Present or submitting a statement: Senator Chambliss.

STATEMENT HON. SAXBY CHAMBLISS, A U.S. SENATOR FROM GEORGIA

Senator CHAMBLISS. This hearing will come to order. And I want to welcome all of you as we discuss the Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs that are due to be reauthorized in the Farm Bill.

First of all, I want to thank Bill Bolling and his great staff here from the Atlanta Community Food Bank for hosting us. Bill is just an amazing guy that I have gotten to know very well over the last several years and just does not only a terrific job right here in the metro Atlanta area but just literally all over the southeast. And he and I were talking downstairs and I had the opportunity to meet a number of the other directors from around the state of food banks, and to all of you I want to say, first of all, welcome here, but thank you for what you do to make sure that those folks who are needy folks throughout our state are getting the advantages that they would not get otherwise and getting nutritious meals that they simply would not get otherwise if it were not for you and the many, many hundreds, hundreds and thousands of volunteers that work in these organizations throughout the state. So for that I say thank you.

Food banks play an important role in the greater Atlanta community to ensure Georgia's families receive the food they need. The staff here has been very generous with their time and efforts to organize our visit and we are truly grateful. And this is my second visit here to the Atlanta Food Bank. I thought I was going to come by the first time and maybe get me a cold muffin and a Coca-Cola out of the vending machine and that would be my, you know, my breakfast this morning, and, gosh, I walked back here in the back to see the operation that Bill has and it is just truly amazing. The Lord is not only looking over this place here, but I think the Lord

is back there working 7 days a week to make sure this happens. It is just a great facility. Nutrition is an important yet often overlooked component of the Farm Bill. However, the nutrition programs are all well known in Georgia. I appreciate the bipartisan approach that the Senate Agriculture Committee has taken on nutrition issues in the past, and I am confident that both sides of the aisle will continue to work together as we craft this year's Farm Bill.

And let me just say up front my dear friend and colleague Senator Tom Harkin, who is Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, really intended to be here and regrets that he couldn't be here this morning. Tom and I have rescheduled this hearing—I think this is the third time that we had it scheduled to accommodate both of our schedules because he truly wanted to see not only the operation here but obviously wanted to hear the testimony as we move forward into the Farm Bill.

Unfortunately, at the eleventh hour before we got out for the Easter break, the majority leader set the schedule for this week, and today, this morning, Tom is the author of the Stem Cell Research Bill on the Democratic side and that bill is on the floor and he had absolutely no control over it. So he hates he cannot be here, but he has sent a member of his staff down here, Derek Miller, who is with us. Derek, thank you very much for coming and representing Tom. Our staffs, as well as the members of the Senate Agriculture Committee work in a bipartisan spirit. I wish I could say that always happens on the floor of the Senate from every standpoint, but the Senate Ag Committee has always been very bipartisan, and now whether we are talking about commodities or conservation or the nutrition title, it is truly farmers and ranchers across America and it is people, when it comes to the nutrition title, that we represent, not a political party. Derek here has worked very closely with our staff over several years, and I truly do appreciate the working relationship that we share, especially on nutrition issues.

Our nutrition assistance programs play a key role in ensuring that needy Americans have access to the food they need to lead healthy, productive lives. I know from the schoolteachers in my family, which is my wife as well as my daughter, the importance of good nutrition, especially for our children's development. Moreover, the nutrition programs increase purchasing power for food and distribution of U.S. farm products which helps farmers and rural America.

Finally, food assistance programs are an important part of this country's safety net. Not long ago our Nation witnessed the Food Stamp's Program—Food Stamp Program's effective emergency response to evacuees from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, including the assistance given to evacuees who sought shelter and relief right here in our home state of Georgia. The U.S. food assistance programs are good for families, good for farmers, and good for America.

Nutrition programs have been and continue to be an important part of the Farm Bill. Under the nutrition title, the Food Stamp Program will receive a large share of the Committee's attention because it not only helps by providing food and emergency aid, it

helps America's needy families on their path to independence and self-sufficiency. Through the fiscal year 2006, 1 out of every 10 Georgians participated in the Food Stamp Program, which generated a Federal investment of over $1 billion for the Georgia economy. In the 10 years since welfare reform was passed by Congress and signed by President Clinton, fewer families received cash welfare and more families are working, exactly what we wanted to see in our great country.

Program administration has also greatly improved. During the past 5 years while average monthly participation increased to a near historical high, the combined error rates of overpayments and underpayments fell to a historical low.

However, we still have room to improve. For example, program modernization should be encouraged to allow participants and administrators to utilize on-line technologies. Increased implementation of modern technologies will bring much needed efficiencies to the program, allow hardworking Americans to stay at work and not make so many visits to the food stamp office, and allow administrators to improve customer service, case management and program accuracy.

In addition, there are some aspects of the Food Stamp Program that may reduce working families' ability to escape the cycle of poverty. The law encourages welfare families to enter the workforce and begin to save money. However, food stamp asset rules conflict with families' abilities to save for their future. The asset limit of $2,000 for most food stamp recipients was set more than 20 years ago. When indexed for inflation, the asset limit would be almost $4,000 today. A higher asset limit may help families buildup savings in order to achieve financial independence and prepare for a rainy day or get an education or eventually end their need to receive food stamps.

Finally, food stamp rules discourage working families from utilizing all the financial investment tools encouraged by the tax code for other hardworking Americans. I believe Congress should take a look at permitting investment and modern savings programs for retirement and savings for higher education.

For these reasons, in February of this year I introduced Senate Bill 591, the Food Stamp Personal Savings and Investment Act of 2007. Joining me as co-sponsors of the bill include Senator Harkin, the current chairman, and five other senior Agriculture Committee members. I understand we will likely be facing budgetary pressures for the Farm Bill. However, I hope that both sides of the aisle, working together, we can address these issues, especially the asset limit issue. Reforming food stamp asset limits has a potential to help needy families break the cycle of poverty and achieve long-term financial independence.

I want to thank all of our witnesses who are with us today, and with our first family here, we will begin with USDA Deputy Administrator for the Food Stamp Program, Clarence Carter, who is here at the last minute substituting for Nancy Johner, who unfortunately got under the weather and couldn't be here. But Clarence, we appreciate very much you being here. We are going to start with you and we look forward to your presentation.

STATEMENT OF CLARENCE CARTER, DEPUTY ADMINISTRATOR, FOOD STAMP PROGRAM, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, DC, ON BEHALF OF NANCY JOHNER, UNDERSECRETARY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Mr. CARTER. Mr. Chairman and people in attendance, it is a pleasure to be here with you this morning. And I do bring you greetings from Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns and also Under Secretary Nancy Montanez Johner, who, as you pointed out, took ill this weekend and was advised not to travel by her doctor, so she sends her regrets. I'm also joined this morning by Kate Houston, who is the Deputy Administrator for the Special Nutrition Programs.

And just before I get to my remarks, I too wanted to acknowledge Bill Bolling and the work of the Atlanta Community Food Bank. In my line of work, I have had the good fortune to see many food banks all across this country, and, Bill, I will tell you here that this is truly a model for food banks all over the country and you folks should be very, very proud of the work that you do here. So I want to tell you to keep up the good work.

I would also like to acknowledge our Southeast Regional Administrator Don Arnette, who is a Regional Administrator for the Food & Nutrition Service that this region encompasses, the eight southeastern states including Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky and Tennessee.

And just one final acknowledgment. Mr. Chairman, I want to acknowledge your wisdom and good judgment in spiriting away our—my former boss Kate Coler, the Deputy Undersecretary at Food, Nutrition and Consumer Service, and our loss is your gain.

Senator CHAMBLISS. I helped train Kate in my House days.

Mr. CARTER. Mr. Chairman, the 15 Domestic Nutrition Assistance Programs administered by FNS, the Food Nutrition Service, work together to improve food security, fight hunger, and support healthy eating for children of low-income people across the Nation. The President's budget for fiscal year 2008 demonstrates the Administration's unwavering commitment to this mission by requesting a record level of $59 billion for these vital programs, which serve one in five Americans over the course of the year.

The Food Stamp Program is the Nation's primary nutrition assistance program, increasing food purchasing power for households with little income and few resources by providing benefits that are redeemed at retail groceries stores across the country. Over 26 million low-income people make use of the program to help put food on the table.

The evidence is clear that the Food Stamp Program makes an important difference in the lives of low-income children and families and the others that it serves. With its nationwide standards for eligibility and benefits, it represents a national nutrition safety net for low-income families and individuals wherever they live. It is designed to expand on automatically to respond to increased need when the economy is in recession and contracts when the economy is growing, making sure that food gets to the people who need it, when they need it.

To sum up, Mr. Chairman, the Food Stamp Program works. That's why we are committed to ensuring effective program operations for all eligible people who wish to participate.

In addition to food stamps, FNS administers 14 Nutrition Assistance Programs designed to complement the Food Stamp Program. These programs provide supplemental nutrition assistance for specific population groups. The other major nutrition assistance programs include:

The Child Nutrition Programs, including the school meal (a lunch and breakfast) programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, support nutritious meals and snacks served to over 31 million children in schools, child care institutions and after-school care programs each and every day.

And for the youngest children and infants, we operate the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC. WIC addresses the special needs of at-risk, low-income pregnant, breast feeding and postpartum women, infants, and children up to 5 years of age. It provides eight million participants monthly with supplemental food packages targeted to their dietary needs, nutrition education, and referrals to a range of health and social services; benefits that promote a healthy pregnancy for mothers and a healthy start for their children.

We also operate several commodity distribution programs that provide important nutrition support to specific populations. Native Americans have the option of receiving commodity-based food packages in lieu of food stamps. Likewise, through the Emergency Food Assistance Program, we provide foods and administrative funding, support our Nation's network of food banks and soup kitchens, critical resources for families in need of immediate but temporary food assistance.

Mr. Chairman, we are using the 2007 Farm Bill process to further improve program access and facilitate future self-sufficiency. The Administration's reform-minded and fiscally responsible proposals build on the success of the 2002 Farm Bill, which include raising food stamp participation rates among eligible populations, restoring eligibility for many illegal immigrants, and providing new flexibility for states to tailor services to better serve their clients. The 2002 Farm Bill improved access, strengthened integrity and provided careful stewardship of the taxpayers' dollars.

For instance, it was my pleasure to award a $1 million grant last year to the Georgia Department of Human Resources to create a web-based food stamp application system in partnership with Georgia Cares in the Division of Aging Services and Christ Lutheran Church, a faith-based organization.

FNS strongly supports state modernization efforts to improve access, integrity and efficiency. Eleven states have statewide electronic applications and three others are piloting operations. Eighteen states have call centers and my staff tells me there is a very fine one here in Atlanta also.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to take a moment to highlight a few of our 2007 Farm Bill proposals. These proposals represent the culmination of a great deal of planning and listening to our partners and stakeholders all across the country.

We propose to strengthen efforts to integrate nutrition education in the Food Stamp Program by recognizing in the Food Stamp Act of 1997 that nutrition education is a component of the program and investing $100 million to establish some 5–year competitive grant demonstration program targeted at developing and testing solutions to the rising rates of obesity. These grants will allow us to evaluate creative and innovative solutions in this complex area such as point-of-sale incentives to purchase fruits and vegetables and increased access among food stamp recipients to farmers markets.

We also propose to change the name of the Food Stamp Program. Stamps, later replaced by coupons, have not been used for many years and does not reflect the program's mission of reducing hunger and improving nutrition among low-income people. Further, implementation of electronic benefits transfer has made food stamps and the program name outdated. Finally, some stakeholders suggest that the name is a barrier to participation because of stigma, especially among the elderly.

Next, our proposal to increase program access include:

Eliminating the cap on the dependent care deduction. The cap was set back in 1993. It is time to eliminate the cap, which would simplify the state administration and help working families with children.

We also propose to exclude the value of college savings plans from the resource limit. This proposal would expand the savings plans eligible for exclusion from the resource limit when determining food stamp eligibility. It supports working poor, encourages focused savings for children's futures and recognizes that households should not have to deplete college savings plans in order to get nutrition assistance.

Excluding combat-related military pay. Enhanced pay from military deployment can sometimes cause families receiving food stamps to no longer be eligible for this vital assistance. This policy change would ensure that military families are not penalized for doing their patriotic duty. It supports the families of servicemen and servicewomen fighting overseas by ensuring that their families back home do not lose food stamps as a result of the additional deployment income.

We are also encouraging savings for retirement. This proposal simplifies food stamp policy and makes it more equitable because under current law some retirement accounts are excluded and some are included when determining eligibility.

Beyond the $100 million in obesity prevention grants, we also propose to improve nutrition for children by:

Adding new mandatory funding for the purchase of additional fruits and vegetables for use through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. This $500 million of funding over 10 years represents a net increase in the total purchase of fruits and vegetables for school meals over levels available under any other authorities.

Conducting a survey of foods purchased by school food authorities with Federal cash assistance once every 5 years. This data would help USDA efforts to provide guidance and technical assistance to school food professionals and the implementation of new

rules intended to conform school meal patterns to the most recent dietary guidelines for Americans; two, better manage the types and varieties of commodities procured by the department on behalf of schools; and three, it would assess the economic impact of school food purchases on various commodity sectors.

Also propose increasing Section 32 spending on fruits and vegetables by $2.75 billion over 10 years. This proposal will increase the availability of fruits and vegetables to low-income individuals and school children participating in nutrition assistance programs, and the consumption of these healthful foods will contribute to the improved health of program participants. This provision will benefit farmers as well as schools, soup kitchens, food banks, after-school programs, and other entities that receive USDA commodities.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, these proposals will help us continue to lead the fight against hunger, and the level of commitment to this task remains high. But we still know that there is more to do. We are continuing to improve program operations, get benefits to those who are already eligible but do not participate, and keep our eye on program integrity in the process.

Thank you for holding this hearing. I'm very pleased to be here. I would also again like to thank the Atlanta Community Food Bank for allowing us to be here today and for the wonderful work they do in this community. We will be happy to answer any questions that you have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Johner can be found on page 26 in the appendix.]

Senator CHAMBLISS. Thank you very much, Mr. Carter, for that excellent testimony, and, of course, your written statement will be made a part of the record.

For the Food Stamp Program, existing and emerging technologies offer great promise to improve service delivery for clients who otherwise may experience great hardship when required to travel to a local DFACS office, often requiring them to miss work. In a letter I sent to Secretary Johanns recently, I asked the department to comment on several times related to improving the Food Stamp Program through the development and implementation of technology. And while I sent this letter only recently, as you know, I'd like to ask you to respond to a few questions if you're able to at this time.

No. 1: What assistance does USDA provide, if any, to help states develop on-line technologies and to what extent does USDA have the ability to share these technologies with other states at no cost?

Second, what steps, including technical assistance, is USDA taking to promote and make these on-line technologies available to states?

And third, what steps is USDA taking to monitor the development of these on-line technologies to ensure that they are the most effective and client friendly?

Mr. CARTER. Mr. Chairman, first of all, we very much appreciate your interest in this area.

The Food Stamp Program, being a part of the human services system, is really, I would say, pretty late to the game in this whole notion of expanding access. The idea of having to go to the local office to be able to receive benefits is an antiquated notion. I no

longer have to go to my bank to receive money, so why is it that I should have to go to a local social services agency to receive these benefits.

So we understand that and the system is moving toward addressing those concerns, and we are in the process of responding to the letter that you sent to Secretary Johanns and it is currently working its way through the bidding process and you should have a formal response to that, I would say, within the week.

If you take a look at the questions that you posed, I would say there are five factors to FNS support to states as we look at the issue of on-line technology. Of course the first is 50/50 funding. We provide 50 percent of the funding for the administration of the program. And so where states are looking to enhance their technology in order to better serve customers, the Federal Government shares in 50 percent of the cost.

In addition, we have a pretty aggressive research agenda in which we are looking at several modernization efforts. Florida has just undergone a very aggressive modernization effort and we are currently doing a research project to determine the effectiveness of that—of that research process and which, of course, we will share those results far and wide.

We also provide technical assistance. As states begin to think about the ideas of modernizing their systems, we provide technical assistance in helping them understand how you stay within all of the program rules and also sharing best practices. We let states know what other states have—have done in attempting to modernize their program so that they can take advantage of the good things that the other states have done, but also not—not fall prey to some of the pitfalls.

And then, of course, we, as I just said, we provide guidance to—guidance to all states, which make sure they are able to stay within the parameters of the law.

So we think that we take a pretty aggressive and comprehensive look at assisting states as they begin to think through these modernization efforts because it is truly the next frontier of delivery of human services.

Senator CHAMBLISS. Let me just take a minute before we leave this subject to explain to the audience why this issue is so important because I think the first reaction of any ordinary American will be if you got somebody on food stamps, they got a computer in their home, how are they going to be able to use technology?

Well, at our hearing in Washington about 6 weeks ago on this very issue, we had a welfare recipient from Ohio who came and talked about the fact that when she finally made the decision that she needed to make application for food stamps, which was a difficult decision for her to make in the first place because it was obviously somewhat of a humbling decision, but one that required her to take off of work, she spent a half a day to go to her local office and fill all of the paperwork that is somewhat lengthy, and then to—by the time she got back to work, she had missed over a half a day. Well, that's X number of hours out of her pocket that she could have used and did need to use to support her family.

So she talked about the fact that if she had the availability to go on-line to make application for food stamps or to express a

change in her condition, that it would be such a great value to her and she said every public library in every community in the state has a computer that every welfare beneficiary can have access to. And it doesn't take a rocket scientist to be able to go in and figure out how to use it.

Well, I will have to tell you, that made a heck of an impression on me, and she makes very good sense by virtue of the—by saying that by virtue of having a computer available, if we have the technology in place that every potential welfare recipient, every potential food stamp recipient can now not have to worry about coming out of the shadows, so to speak, but this program is so valuable and so important it ought to be a positive in somebody's life rather than have a negative impact.

So with the availability of computers at public libraries and for people to now to go in and have access to those computers and to go on-line to be able the fill out their applications, which are much easier to do than it is going in and filling them out in person, they can do it after work, and she said the real advantage of this is I can sit my child down over here and have my child reading or studying while I am on the computer trying to make sure that we get our application filled out in a proper way.

So it, you know, it is just one of those advantages of modern technology that this particular aspect of our social programs at the Federal level are now beginning to develop and take advantage of. And, Clarence, I want to commend USDA for really taking some initiative on this and trying to make sure that we do have the technology available to provide this service to individuals all across America to take advantage of.

And I also, before we leave that, when I got to Congress in 1995, GAO did a study in January of that year in which they concluded that the welfare—the Food Stamp Program in this country had a waste, fraud and abuse factor of over 25 percent. Well, when you look at the fact that we spend about $30 billion a year on the Food Stamp Program, that gives you an indication of how much money was being wasted, and it means that there are a lot of folks who ought to be taking advantage of the program that were not being able to take advantage of it because of the fact that fraud, this waste, fraud and abuse factor was taking away from them.

We began reforming that system when—in concert with the Department of Agriculture, and again this was a bipartisan effort. In January of 2006, GAO did a subsequent report on this, this issue, and concluded that the current waste, fraud and abuse factor in the Food Stamp Program is less than 6 percent, a dramatic change in that we are now not just saving a lot of money, we have got a lot more money that is available for our recipients, and it allows the department to have some additional funding available to develop this technology so that we can help get the program out into the hands of the people that need it the most. So there has been a dramatic shift, in large part due to the folks at the local level who have made a great effort to make sure that folks who need the Food Stamp Program are now being able to take advantage of it, and we do not have the abuses that we were seeing for so many years.

So I want to commend the department, but I also want to commend the local folks for the great job that you have done to help improve this situation.

Mr. CARTER. Mr. Chairman, if I could just echo that. Our state and local partners in the delivery of this program have really stepped up to the plate, and so we are seeing historically low error rates, we are seeing historically low trafficking rates, and we are seeing the benefit getting to those who are most in need, and it really is because, I believe, of a Federal, state and local partnership that works the way it is supposed to administer this program.

Senator CHAMBLISS. In your testimony you mentioned the national media campaign to conduct Food Stamp Program outreach. When will the outreach campaign begin and what will be used to measure the outcomes to campaign, what factors are considered in decisions about where to concentrate media outreach and in what languages will be used in the media campaign?

Mr. CARTER. Mr. Chairman, the media campaign is currently entering its fourth year. We are airing our fourth cycle in the media campaign. And in order to determine where we would upgrade the media campaign, we worked with our regional offices and our states to look at where we had challenges in participation. Where we saw there were low participation rates, we attempted to use this media campaign to enhance that. We have materials available in English and Spanish, and we are particularly proud of, in our Hispanic outreach, we see—we have a Hispanic hot line, and we see a dramatic increase in calls to that hot line whenever we—whenever we do our Spanish language media material.

So we are—and we work with our—with our local partners to determine where the need is and then run the programs, or run the campaign in those areas, and we have seen increases in participation based on where we have that—our media campaign. It is in its fourth year of operation at this point.

Senator CHAMBLISS. Summer food service programs serves, for any given year, only a fraction of the students who receive free meals in the national school lunch program. To make it easier for meal providers to participate in the program, I am an original cosponsor of a bill introduced in the Senate to expand the simplified summer feeding program nationwide. What is USDA doing to increase the participation to ensure children receive the food they need when school is out for the summer?

Mr. CARTER. Kate, why do not you take that one.

Ms. HOUSTON. Mr. Chairman, thank you so much for raising the important issue of summer feeding.

As you mentioned, we have a challenge getting average daily participation in the summer months. During the school year we serve about 31 million school meals a day, but in the summer we are averaging only about 2 million. So admittedly we have a lot of work to do in this area.

FNS is committed to addressing the issue of increasing participation among summer feeding programs, and we really have a two-pronged approach that is improving participation at summer feeding sites, but also increasing the number of sponsors we have to run summer programs.

You mentioned that you are on the bill for the simplified summer program. It is currently operating in 27 states, and we found that the program does reduce paperwork and then makes the program—makes more sponsors interested in operating the program as a result.

We also have a seamless summer option that we hope is increasing participation among sponsors by allowing school sites to participate in the National School Lunch Program to operate a summer program under the same rules without having to reapply. So both of those—both of those strategies we think are helping with participation.

We are also involved with FNS trying to promote the program through conferences, national media campaigns, and we have recently implemented rural transportation grants that were authorized by Congress in 2004. That is operating in five states currently, and we are finding that by improving transportation needs for children to get to sites, we can increase the number of children who have access to summer meals.

Senator CHAMBLISS. Mr. Carter, you talked about an issue that I want to highlight a little bit, and that is the issue of nutrition education as well as this program of trying to give our recipients access to farmers markets so they can get the fresh fruits and vegetables.

One constant criticism of the program that we as policymakers have heard over the years is the fact that somebody will be standing in line at a grocery store behind somebody who is purchasing items with food stamps and the items that they see being purchased are not the normal items that it takes to feed a child. There is going to be maybe popcorn, candy, or whatever being purchased with food stamps and it seems like that those are the only items that they see purchased with food stamps as opposed to fresh fruits and vegetables and nutrition items.

Now, there are obviously always reasons for that to be the case, and it is not that we intend to end the program to deny any child the opportunity to enjoy some other things other than the fresh fruits and vegetables, but my point is talk a little bit more about what you are doing in this area of nutrition education so that when a particularly young mother goes to the grocery store to buy food, that she has knowledge of what type of food she ought to buy to make sure that her young child is getting the kind of nutrition that is going to make that child a healthy child and thereby a better citizen.

Mr. CARTER. Mr. Chairman, the first thing I would like to do in response to that question is to really attempt to explode the myth that somehow food stamp recipients have worse eating habits than the rest of this society. We have a challenge with nutrition and healthy eating all across the board in this society if you make $1 or $1 million. And so we certainly want to make sure that that stigma is not only visited on the population that receives food stamps.

Now that being said, we of course want to make sure that within the Food Stamp Program that we provide as much guidance to families that need this assistance as is possible so that not only on one hand do they have the resources to purchase food, but they

also have a knowledge base from which to purchase the best foods. So therefore, we have a nutrition education program in which, again, we subsidize 50 percent of the state's spending where it targets education programs to the food stamp recipients. And we have seen some amazing partnerships that work in conjunction with our states and our cooperative extension associations that really help our food stamp population be able to make the best choices possible.

I think Kate might want to talk a little bit about some expanded work we have done on our fruit and vegetables front, but we see nutrition education as working hand in hand with the Food Stamp Program so on one hand you have the resource, on the other hand you have the education to be able to make the best possible decisions you can on those very limited resources.

Kate, do you want to talk about fruits and vegetables at all?

Ms. HOUSTON. Sure. I will just reemphasize what was mentioned in the testimony, that we have a number of proposals within our Farm Bill proposal to increase fruit and vegetable consumption. Recognizing that one in five Americans participate in nutrition assistance program, we really see the Farm Bill as an opportunity to encourage better eating patterns consistent with the dietary guidelines.

We are proposing $2.75 billion in Section 32 funds over the next 10 years be spent to increase fruit and vegetable purchases. We anticipate these fruits and vegetables would be available for all of the nutrition assistance programs operated by the department, but we particularly anticipate the TEFAP program as being a primary beneficiary.

We also are proposing $50 million per year for increased fruit and vegetable purchases for the National School Lunch Program, and we believe that if we get fruits and vegetables to schools and we help to teach children eating patterns early, that is really a nutrition education tool that we can help to set lifetime eating patterns.

Senator CHAMBLISS. That issue of allowing our school nutrition folks to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables locally is an issue that is very near and dear to my heart since I come from the heart of agriculture country in Georgia, and needless to say because my son-in-law happens to be a produce farmer, I'm particularly interested. I know how expensive his wife is to maintain.

We—Georgia has not been a participant in the fresh fruits and vegetables program to this point in time. We have got 15 states, I believe it is, that are participating in that program. We were scheduled to come in this year. We were included in the agriculture appropriation bill last year, so unfortunately that did not get done because that bill never got passed in the form that it came out of the committee. But this year we are going to ensure that Georgia does participate and that we continue to expand this program, because a school lunch program that allows a nutritionist to go out to the local farmers market or even the local grocery store and to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables can dramatically impact those kids that are getting those school lunches. So I'm very pleased to see the department give the emphasis to this program that you are.

Last, Mr. Carter, let me go back to an issue you mentioned because it is very much at the forefront right now with situations ongoing from a military standpoint in the world. You talked about military families receiving food stamps. I remember when I was elected to the House as a member of the Armed Services Committee in 1995, and it came to light that we had a large number, several thousand military families at that time who were eligible for the Food Stamp Program, and that was sort of appalling to a lot of us who were new members of that committee. And I know that we gave a lot of effort and concentrated a lot on trying to remove as many of those folks as possible through increase in pay. And I know today those numbers have been dramatically reduced, but could you elaborate on that a little bit more as to the participation by military families in the Food Stamp Program?

Mr. CARTER. Sure. And I apologize that I do not have a specific number or percentage of military families that participate, and I can make that information available to you, but what I would say is that this Administration has realized that what we do not want to do is as we—as individuals, put themselves on the front line in service to this Nation, in some instances they are—their families are eligible to receive food stamps. And when they are on the front lines, they are eligible for an increased military or combat pay, and we wanted to recognize that service by not adding that military pay as an additional resource for the purposes of eligibility. Without this provision, that if an individual were to receive the extra military supplement, that would have to be counted as a resource and then could potentially make that family ineligible.

So we see in this Farm Bill proposal, which has been in the last two presidents' budgets, we want to make this part of the Farm Bill proposal, which would exclude that military pay from the resource limit of an individual, so that we, when, as we try to honor their service, we also do not make it more difficult for them to support their families.

Senator CHAMBLISS. Let me thank you and Ms. Houston for being here today. Thanks for your testimony, thanks to the great work you are doing at USDA, and we look forward to staying in touch as we go through the Farm Bill process and dialog and relative to the nutrition side.

Mr. CARTER. Mr. Chairman, thanks so much for having us this morning. It is a pleasure to be here with you.

Ms. HOUSTON. Thank you very much.

Senator CHAMBLISS. At this time we will ask our second panel to come forward. Mary Dean Harvey, Division Director, Division of Family and Children Services; Mr. Alan Essig, the Executive Director, Georgia Budget and Policy Institute; and Ms. Taquana Spicer, who is a Georgia food stamp recipient.

Ms. Harvey, we are going to start with you, and I want to say at the outset, you and I had a chance to visit right quick downstairs, and I know that you are a long-time good friend of Secretary Mike Johanns, you are both Nebraskans. You are a lot better looking than he is. We are here—we are very pleased that you are here to provide testimony. I look forward to telling the Secretary that you were here today, and I know he thanks you for the great work that you are doing and for your participation in this hearing. We

will start with you, with your comments, and Mr. Essig and Ms. Spicer, we'll come right down the line.

STATEMENT OF MARY DEAN HARVEY, DIVISION DIRECTOR, DIVISION OF FAMILY AND CHILDREN SERVICES, ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Ms. HARVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is my pleasure this morning to address the Committee on the Food Stamp Program, and to really underscore many of the things that Mr. Carter mentioned and you addressed in your opening comments.

Georgians, by nature, are both compassionate and practical, which is why we value the Food Stamp Program so much. It can be the difference between children who get a good start in life and those who do not. Between having the basic necessaries of life and choosing what to do without. Between a happy retirement and a decline into dependence. In other words, the Food Stamp Program is the cornerstone of all social services.

Today we would like to focus on a few enhancements that would make a great program an even better program. One is expanding the use of technology, which has been addressed. Next is strengthening the focus and self-sufficiency, and improving the way we serve the elderly.

We believe a greater investment in technology would bring more access, improve quality and fewer errors. While low-income citizens used to have little access to technology, as has been pointed out, that access has been broadly expanded. Today it is a different world for them.

Thanks to a $1 million food stamp participation grant from USDA Food & Nutrition Service and a $2 million gift from Governor Perdue and the Georgia Technology Authority, Georgians will soon be able to start the application process, report changes in household income, schedule interviews and appointments and receive a checklist of all verified items, all on the web.

If we can process 35 percent of our applications on-line each year, we will save our workers approximately 240,000 hours, so that they can focus on the things only that they need to and improving the quality of our services while reducing our errors, making it faster, friendlier, easier, and more convenient for recipients.

Employing technology can help instill self-sufficiency as well. Strengthening the overall program support of self-sufficiency would have an even bigger impact. We'd like to see services for the able-bodied adults without dependents function more like TANF where stricter requirements and better assistance has helped Georgia reach a work participation rate of now 70 percent, with many counties having zero mandated adults on our rolls. Support such as job coaching, transitional support to help them stay employed with returners representing about 8 percent of our clients have proved to be beneficial for the state of Georgia.

Another good example that I would like to point out is our Fatherhood Program, which invests in training and educational programs for non-custodial fathers and mothers to help them get better paying jobs so that they could meet their child support obligations and have a bigger impact on their children's lives. So far this year we've had over 2,300 participants, 60 percent of whom have

gotten new or better jobs. Now we are reaching out to our prison population, transitioning them back into society, assisting them in finding jobs so that they can help to support their children.

As one of the useful and reliable tools in our human services toolbox, the Food Stamp Program could do even better work for us with similar enhanced work requirements and incentives.

For those past their working years, the Food Stamp Program becomes an even more important part of support. The elderly are a vulnerable and growing population. Many live on small, fixed incomes, but because they may have other benefits, they often qualify only for the minimum food stamp benefit; and that is just $10 a month. In fact, 62 percent of the people receiving the minimum benefit in Georgia are single persons over the age of 60. That minimum hasn't been adjusted since 1974 and has approximately one-fourth of the buying power as it did back then. That means that the cost of a quart of milk, a dozen eggs and a loaf of bread in 1974 would buy you today a half pint of milk, three eggs, and enough bread for a couple of sandwiches.

The single most effective change to help seniors would be to raise that minimum benefit to at least $25 a month, not only increasing its value, but also making it more likely that seniors would participate. Too many of them decide applying isn't worth $10 a month, so they skip the program and a few meals.

Increasing the asset limit would also help and that has been addressed. With people living longer, they'll need the homes, the IRAs and everything they've managed to save. We can make food stamps even more valuable by taking that into account.

Seniors have a great demand on them today. More than 164,000 children in Georgia are living in a household headed by a grandparent, children who might otherwise be in foster care. We'd rather have them living in the loving arms of family than in our foster care system. Through our department-wide Grandparents Raising Grandchildren initiative, we prioritize those seniors for many services. We give them an extra $50 a month as relative placements and we help them make their homes ready to raise children again with an initial payment. Enhanced food stamp benefits would help both those seniors and the children they care for.

I cannot begin to imagine how we would do our jobs as social service providers without this valuable program. On the contrary, what I can easily imagine is how we could make it even more an integral part of our overall package for strengthening families and making individuals more self-sufficient.

We would encourage you to help drive our work in that direction. Holding states accountable with penalties is necessary but not sufficient to optimize the impact of the program. Balancing those with additional incentives can give us something higher to reach for, producing better long-term social outcomes and paying dividends to America for a long time to come.

Thank you for the opportunity. I would be glad to answer any questions you have.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Harvey can be found on page 47 in the appendix.]

Senator CHAMBLISS. Thank you. Mr. Essig.

STATEMENT OF ALAN ESSIG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, GEORGIA BUDGET AND POLICY INSTITUTE, ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Mr. ESSIG. Mr. Chairman, first I would especially like to thank you for your leadership in the Committee in recent years. You have been a true champion of the Food Stamp Program. It is greatly appreciated.

The Food Stamp Program is a win/win for Georgia.

The Food Stamp Program pumped over $1 billion into the Georgia economy 2005, benefiting farmers, grocers and small businesses throughout the state. The Food Stamp Program helps over 920,000 residents buy food each month. The Food Stamp Program is one of the most efficiently administered programs in the Federal Government. It is the largest food assistance program in the country and the Nation's largest child nutrition program. About 80 percent of food stamp benefits go to households with children, many of them in working families.

Although Georgia continues to approach the national average in median income, thousands of Georgians have trouble making ends meet and often struggle to purchase adequate food. In fact, 14.4 percent of Georgians, over 1.2 million people, live in poverty in 2005. Georgia ranked 14th highest in poverty rates among the states. Although overall poverty was high, children's poverty in Georgia was even greater. In 2005, 20.2 percent of Georgia's children lived in poverty, giving Georgia the 15th highest child poverty rate in the Nation. This has led to Georgia having the 14th worst rate of food insecurity in the Nation. USDA has found that more than 12 percent of Georgia's households are food insecure, what most people would call hungry. Census Bureau data shows that an estimated 408,000 households in Georgia live with hunger.

Even people who get food stamps frequently find that the benefit is not enough to get them through the month. Due to a cut rate in 1996 and that remains in effect today, the benefit is declining in purchasing power. The average monthly benefit here is only $1.07 per meal, but that benefit buys less and less food from year to year. How can anyone live off $1.07 a meal for a whole month, let alone purchase an adequate nutritious diet?

This means families struggle to have enough to eat as the month goes by and the food stamps run out. In Georgia the benefits lost due to the erosion of the benefit standard deduction since 1996 will reach $15 million by 2008 and a staggering $711 million between 2008 and 2017.

The committee heard recently from Rhonda Stewart, a food stamp participant from Ohio, who spoke eloquently about the struggle to stretch the food stamp benefit to last the month and the difficulty choices she had to make. Georgians face these same choices at the end of the month when the food stamps are gone, between paying the utility bills or buying milk, between the adults eating or feeding the children. For children, not having enough food can be particularly devastating because they need proper nutrients and quantities of food to help them develop cognitively, physically and emotionally.

The Senate Agriculture Committee took steps to ameliorate this problem in the 2002 Farm Bill by indexing the standard deduction used to calculate benefits for larger households. This year the Sen-

ate finished this job and indexed the deduction for all households. While it would not restore benefits to the level they should be, it will prevent the benefit from further erosion. The cost of this improvement would be about $1.3 billion over 5 years. Almost half of the benefits in this change will go to families with children. Slightly more than half will go to households with an elderly or disabled member. Stopping the erosion of benefits is a vital part of efforts to reduce hunger and improve the nutritional status of food stamp participants.

Another problem is that many people who need food stamps cannot get it through Federal eligibility rules. Thank you, Senator Chambliss, for sponsoring an important bill to allow needy families to receive food stamps if they have modest savings put aside for emergencies, education or retirements. S. 591 is a vitally important piece of legislation.

I would also like to mention the problems for working poor families that pay for child care. The average cost of child care for poor mothers is almost $350 per month. Many low-income families in Georgia must pay this full expense out of pocket. The Administration's budget this year proposes to help these households by adjusting food stamp populations so they can deduct the full amount of their child care costs they incur. Currently the amount is capped at the 1993 levels of $200 or less. The Senate could eliminate the cap on the child care deduction to help these families bear the high cost of child care without sacrificing food.

Congress also should work hard to reduce access barriers to the Food Stamp Program. In Georgia only 67 percent of all households who are eligible for food stamps receive the benefit. The participation rate for the working poor is even lower at 57 percent.

I would also like to ask the committee to oppose the President's proposal to eliminate 300,000 low-income people from the program by stripping state's flexibility provided in 1996 Welfare Law, which allows states to coordinate their eligibility rules with state TANF programs. Those affected generally would be among the most vulnerable groups the program serves: working families with children that are receiving some kind of TANF-funded support. In Georgia, 811 children would lose food stamps as well as 625 adults and elderly people. The Committee has rejected this cut every time the President has proposed it, should continue to protect these vulnerable households.

In closing, I want to thank the committee for taking the time to learn about the importance of the Food Stamp Program. I also want to thank you for your consideration of the six food stamp recommendations for the 2007 Farm Bill: stop the erosion of benefits, to simplify enrollment, to adjust benefits to more accurately reflect child care costs, to allow more families with modest assets to participate in the Food Stamp Program, reduce access barriers to the Food Stamp Program, and to reject the Administration's proposed termination of some working poor families from the program by ending state flexibility to use categorical eligibility.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Essig can be found on page 37 in the appendix.]

Senator CHAMBLISS. Thank you very much.

I talked to Ms. Spicer a little earlier today and she said something about being nervous. She has three children that she will describe in a minute, she's used to talking to an audience of three rather than an audience this size, so before she starts, let's make her all feel welcome and honor her for being here today.

[Applause.]

Senator CHAMBLISS. Ms. Spicer, thank you.

STATEMENT OF TAQUANA SPICER, CLAYTON COUNTY, GEORGIA

Ms. SPICER. OK. To the Chairman and Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen of the Senate, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. It is truly an honor.

Please let me begin by introducing myself. My name is Taquana Spicer. I live in Clayton County, Georgia. I am an administrative assistant with Hearts to Nourish Hope, a nonprofit agency that offers services to at-risk youth. I obtained my position through the TANF work program and I have been with my organization for 4 years. I also have three children, ages ten, six and two.

Before I obtained my current position, I was out of work and found myself living in a shelter in Fulton County with my children. I was in the shelter for 6 months and during that time I could not find a job. I was finally able to move out to Clayton County with my mother's help. She had received a small amount of back child support from my father and used the money to help me find housing.

While I was in the process of moving, I missed a TANF—I'm sorry—I missed an appointment to transfer my TANF and food stamp cases from Fulton County to Clayton County and my benefits were terminated. I found myself living in Clayton County with no job, no benefits and no food for my children. When I had so little money that I could not afford bus fare, I walked four and a half hours to the local DFACS office to reapply for my benefits. At that time I was enrolled in the Clayton County TANF work program. Because I wasn't given emergency food stamps at the time, the woman in charge of the TANF work program, Diane Danely, bought me $50 worth of groceries to get me through the month, and I will always be grateful for her assistance. Ms. Danely also decided that it would be better for me to obtain clerical experience rather than finding another job as a salesclerk. She placed me in my current position with Hearts to Nourish Hope, and I was eventually given a full-time position.

I love my job and working with my organization. We help older children who are at risk by providing GED classes, counseling and help with homework and a place to go after school. I love the children, and I see how many of them are in the same position I was when I was their age. I want to help them go about things in a different way than I did. I feel very—I'm sorry. I feel very lucky to work where I do.

In my position with Hearts to Nourish Hope I work full time and take home pay is approximately $960 a month. My rent is $700 a month, plus I have expenses for child care, utilities, and public transportation, as well as for my children's clothing and supplies. At this time I do not receive child support. Without my monthly al-

lotment of food stamps, which is $462, I would not be able to make ends meet. If my food stamps were cut even by $50, I would not be able to pay some other bills such as my lights, gas or even my rent. I always use plenty of coupons when I shop, and I typically buy food at Wal-Mart. Because I buy bulk foods, they last a lot longer. I usually spend $150 to $175 every 2 weeks on groceries. Sometimes I have enough food for my children and sometimes I do not. It typically depends on whether or not the children are out of school. Because they eat breakfast and lunch at school, I have a harder time during holidays or on the weekends. Food stamps are very important to me and my family.

I am very hopeful that 1 day I will no longer have to receive food stamps. I obtained my GED in 1999 and I'm going back to school this fall to study in business administration. I plan to attend Shorter College and am optimistic that going back to school will lead to an increase in my income. In the meantime, the help I receive from food stamps, the Food Stamp Program, will enable me to achieve my goals and I also want the best for children. What I want most is for them—what I want most is that they won't have to receive food stamps when they are adults. I also want to be able to provide them with the things that they need and good nutritious food. I am grateful to the Food Stamp Program for helping me to be able to do this, and I want to thank you for your generous support of the program. I know many other people who are like me who work hard and who just need a little bit of help to make a better life for themselves and their children.

Thank you for your time and allowing me to tell my story. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Spicer can be found on page 52 in the appendix.]

Senator CHAMBLISS. Well, thank you very much for that emotional and inspired story. You did very well.

[Applause.]

Senator CHAMBLISS. Ms. Harvey, one of the ideas that we discussed earlier with Mr. Carter was the investment in technology to improve the Food Stamp Program, and I know here in Georgia we are moving very rapidly toward the development of a web site. Talk a little bit about that web site, when is it going to be ready, how easy is it going to be for individuals to access that web site, and go through the process of filling out an application either for new benefits, changing benefits, changing counties, whatever the situation may be.

Ms. HARVEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think the most recent example that Ms. Spicer gave us highlights the need to have access via technology. She would not have had to, A, miss that appointment at the office, the case could have been transferred to the other county where she had moved, and, B, benefits would not have been discontinued, and you would not have had to walk four miles. My hat is off to you.

So we are very, very excited about the ability to get on-line access coming up pretty quickly. I might say, being the prudent people that we are in DHR, when I said it is a department-wide effort, we are using—we are leveraging resources with the department of

aging, Division of Aging as well so that we will be able to access Medicaid and a whole bunch of things through that option.

I have a ton of support out here with me today, so I will ask Bonita to tell us when we think we will have our on-line access ready.

Ms. EDWARDS. It is approximately about 18 months we expect to have that application finished and up and running.

Ms. HARVEY. And I really thank you. Thank you. I want to thank our regional office as well and to recognize them. We work with tons of Federal entities in getting our work done, and one of the more responsive of those is our FNS regional office. I would like to thank them for that. And forgive me, Batista.

Senator CHAMBLISS. How has Georgia utilized the Food Stamp Program as a resource to cope with the situation involving Hurricanes Katrina and Rita?

Ms. HARVEY. When we look at our food stamp application and participation rate, we saw huge, a huge increase, particularly following Hurricane Katrina and Rita, and, I might point out, the most recent tornado that we had in about eight to eleven counties in south central Georgia here most recently. We were able to—and again, hats off to all of those people who were responsible for administering that program—we were able to get food stamps to people immediately, because that was an immediate need without having them go through a long, cumbersome process. So we were able to expedite services to them and found good support from our regional office in having that happen.

So without having that benefit and making it available to people, clearly people would have been in trouble. Georgia experienced a huge influx of folks as a result of that hurricane, and I was in Americus, went to Americus the day after the tornado there, and again we had to set up the same kind of emergency offices there, and when I approached our building where we were located, there were 200 folk in line. And what they were looking for primarily was a means to secure food because they had lost their food. For those who even have homes left standing, the power had been out. And that power stayed out for many days. So food was essential. And I cannot underscore the importance of that particular benefit by saying it truly is the cornerstone of all social services.

Senator CHAMBLISS. When you have a situation like that, does somebody have to go through filling out all the paperwork, or do you take emergency measures just to get something in their hands so they can buy food?

Ms. HARVEY. We take emergency measures. And the wonderful part about all of that is that we were holding our breath, waiting for those counties, particularly with the last tornado, to be declared a disaster because we have to have disaster declarations before we can get any benefits out to them.

But the good news is we had gained such experience with Katrina and Rita that we knew how to do the preparatory work so that the moment that the President declared the area a disaster area, we were able to get those benefits in the hands of people. So within a very short timeframe we can provide that assistance.

Senator CHAMBLISS. Great.

The department is proposing to change of the name of the Food Stamp Program to the Food and Nutrition Program. Do you have any—first of all, do you agree with that? Do you have any suggestions or comments to them about that?

Ms. HARVEY. I applaud it. I commend them. It is about time. We haven't had stamps for so long. We haven't had the paper coupons for so long. The electronic benefits is a widely accepted and yet well practiced thing. It removed—that tool, in and of itself, removed a lot of stigma. It is tough for folk now to tell whether that is a credit card that is being swiped or what that is that is being swiped. So it just incorporates that body of Americans who find it necessary to use that tool to assist their families, it incorporates them into the larger society.

I would so support the change of the names. Food and nutrition. I oftentimes have to remind people of the economic impact that this program has on every state, not just Georgia, but every state. When my guys were in Nebraska, I knew towns that would have shut down had we pulled that out of the economy.

So this program is beneficial not only for the children and families who are direct recipients, it is also a huge economic boost. Any time we are putting nearly a billion dollars into the economy of the state of Georgia via this one vehicle, I think it deserves to be elevated and recognized for the importance that it holds for all of us.

Senator CHAMBLISS. I actually learned something today. I had no idea that one out of every ten Georgians takes advantage of the program annually. That is an amazing figure.

Mr. Essig, you mentioned the great strides that Congress, USDA, and the states have made to address the issue of Food Stamp Program payment error rates and successfully bring these error rates down to historical lows. What should the Committee consider to protect and encourage program accuracy?

Mr. ESSIG. I give a lot of credit to Congress and the states, and I think Georgia is a perfect example of that, where they have really concentrated, the last four or 5 years, on trying to be as accurate as possible. I think the—some of the proposals that you were talking about, nowadays anything that can bring better technology into the system that can help us do things more efficiently will help improve the system. I think it is a question of prioritizing, a question of the importance of it. I mean, there comes a point where I do not think anything is ever going to be perfect. I do not think we can get 100 percent. Human beings are going to take mistakes and that is going to happen. But I think we can get to a point where we can get as low as we possibly can.

And then I think the challenge is to keep it at that, and I think a lot of that is just keeping the focus on accuracy, keeping the best technology possible, making sure that the staff makes that as a focus. And again I really think in Georgia DFACS has really made that a priority the last four or 5 years. I cannot speak for other states, but there has been obviously a national—you know, that a lot of states are doing better on it. But I think in Georgia we are really doing a better job on that.

We can use your assistance from the Federal Government and possibly get additional funding and technology help. But it is a question of focused priority, I think on the bureaucracy, to make

it as efficient as possible, as fair as possible, to be as accurate as possible. I think we have had that focus the last four or 5 years. It is a question of keeping it there.

Senator CHAMBLISS. We are talking about developing technology to allow folks to go on-line. How are we going to do oversight to make sure that an individual who goes into a public library as opposed to coming face to face with a caseworker at a DFACS office is truly the person they say they are.

Mr. ESSIG. I think that is a challenge not just in state programs, but we are now on an on-line—the society has changed tremendously. We do a lot of our shopping, a lot of our business on-line. And it is always that who—if I'm buying something from Amazon.com, do they know it is me, do they know it is my credit card. I am not a technology expert, so I cannot tell you exactly how to do it, but it is being done all over the country. Other states have been very, I think, successful in adapting this technology. I think there is models out there. And again it is having the focus on the importance of it, having the flexibility to do it the best way possible.

But I think it is the—it is the wave of the future, and it is up to us to develop the system and the technology—technological capabilities to assure that we do not have fraud and abuse as we go more on-line. But I think going more on-line is inevitable, and I think it is better for the recipient, it is better for the state, it is better for the Federal Government. And again every—it is the way business is done and this is just another business—you know, applying for government services is just another business aspect of looking at your life. And we need to—we just need to make it a focus.

Senator CHAMBLISS. In your testimony you mention that there are access barriers out there for food stamp recipients to—that they encounter from time to time. What are these barriers, how can we as policymakers address these barriers, eliminate these barriers, make them easier to knock down so that folks can have access to the program?

Mr. ESSIG. And here is another example where I really want to compliment the state in the last couple years. They have really made some reforms that have made it easier on food stamp recipients. I think you have talked to some of them in some of your opening comments. And I think the example that Ms. Spicer went through is a good example of how we should not have the type of barriers she had to go through.

You know, if having someone who has a job, that is maybe an hourly wage worker and to expect them to take half a day off, a full day off to apply for these kind of benefits is a huge barrier. So anything we can do through technology to being able to apply over the phone, being able to apply over the Internet, anything we can do to make it easier on that. At the same time have the systems in place to make sure that that reduces the problem would be a huge step forward.

It is a question of how—and again I think the business analogy, you know, the idea of business today is how to make it as simple as possible for consumers to buy what they need to buy. And I think we need to have the same philosophy with how we do busi-

ness as government, whether it is at the Federal level or state level. How do we make it simple? How do we make it seamless? How do we make it so it is as not intrusive as possible?

At the same time, we need to be very aware of taxpayers' money and there is accountability that we all have to be aware of and to build those systems in place within the wondrous technology that we have today that will allow us, allow folks like Ms. Spicer to be at home on the weekend to a library computer as opposed to taking a half day off of work.

Senator CHAMBLISS. Ms. Spicer, again you are the very heart of why we are here today talking about food stamps. It is situations like yours that this program needs to address, and I applaud your spirit, your determination, your persistence in making sure that your children do have the nutrition that are going make them smarter young people, better prepared young people, and you are certainly to be commended for that.

I am also grateful that you are mentoring other young people in your work today and help them find a—in trying to help them find a better way of life out there. You are an example of the goodness and hope that nutrition programs can provide, an example of which we can all be proud.

One of the initiatives underway in several states includes simplifying of the process of individuals to fill out and submit food stamp—food stamp applications. In your experience, how difficult is the application process for participants and what are the hardest parts to complete?

Ms. SPICER. I would say it is difficult, like he said, taking off work and having to go spend half a day in the office as opposed to being at work where I could be getting the income that I need to have. If I could fill it out even at work on-line that would be great.

The hardest part filling out—actually, the application is not that hard. The application itself is not that hard. It is basically the hardest part is humbling yourself, having to go in there and you never know what you would be dealing with as far as, you know, other people's attitudes and how they feel.

Senator CHAMBLISS. In your testimony you shared the experience of losing benefits when you moved from Fulton County to Clayton County, and this is one of the aspects that we really want to address with this technology improvement that we are talking about.

At the time when your benefits were dropped, would it have been possible to renew your benefits by using a computer or a computer-based application make the process easier?

Ms. SPICER. Yes.

Senator CHAMBLISS. For transfer as well as what you just talked about?

Ms. SPICER. Yes. I missed out on the appointment because of transferring from Fulton County to Clayton County. They had already sent a renewing letter to my old address and I did not get it at the new address, so I know to renew my benefits—I'm sorry—call metro change center when it is time to let them know of a change, and I called in and they had already said that I missed the appointment. I knew if I could have just went on-line it would have been easier.

Senator CHAMBLISS. Well, again thanks to all of you for providing valuable testimony here today. I assure you that your testimony is going to be duly considered as we look at the nutrition title and the reauthorization of the Food Stamp Program. You certainly have given us a lot of insight, not just to the day-to-day operation on the beneficiary side, but from an administration standpoint. We thank you for giving us your—the benefit of your testimony and your ideas about what direction we need to go in.

Well, that concludes our hearing, and I again want to thank Bill. Bill, raise your hand back there for those of you that do not know Bill Bolling.

[Applause.]

Senator CHAMBLISS. What a great American Bill is, but this place would not operate with the great staff that Bill has here, both the very few paid staff and the many hundreds of volunteers that he has. And for those of you who would like to have a tour of this facility, and if you have never had one, folks, you ought to take advantage of it. I tell you, it is an amazing process from which you will walk away feeling good about your country, good about your county and about your state if you are from Georgia and live in this area.

So if you would like to go on a tour, if you will meet downstairs in the lobby there, is that where we are going to be? If you will meet in the lobby downstairs, there will be folks who will be happy to give you a tour.

This record is going to remain open for 5 days for anyone who wishes to submit a statement, and with that this hearing will be concluded.

[Whereupon at 11:21 a.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

April 10, 2007

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Food, Nutrition and Consumer Service

Statement of Nancy Montanez Johner, Under Secretary

Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture

Atlanta, GA

April 10, 2007

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am Nancy Montanez Johner, Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Joining me today are Kate Houston, Deputy Administrator for Special Nutrition Programs and Clarence Carter, Deputy Administrator for the Food Stamp Program.

I would also like to take this opportunity to introduce Don Arnette, Regional Administrator for the Food and Nutrition Service's Southeast Regional Office, located here in Atlanta. The Southeast Regional Office administers the agency's programs in Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky and Tennessee.

Mr. Chairman, the 15 domestic nutrition assistance programs administered by FNS work together to improve food security, fight hunger, and support healthy eating for children and low-income people across the Nation. The President's budget for Fiscal Year 2008 demonstrates the Administration's unwavering commitment to this mission by requesting a record level of $59 billion dollars for these vital programs, which serve one in five Americans over the course of a year.

The Food Stamp Program is the Nation's primary nutrition assistance program, increasing food purchasing power for households with little income and few resources by providing benefits that are redeemed at retail grocery stores across the country. Over 26 million low-income people make use of the program to help put food on the table.

This program provides substantial benefits to low-income families with children, helping them to stretch their buying power. About half of all food stamp recipients are children, nearly 80 percent of food stamp benefits go to households with children, and over 80 percent of all children who are eligible for benefits receive them. On average, households with children receive about $300 in food stamp benefits each month, with the amount varying based on the size and income level of the household. Food stamp households also benefit from nutrition education that is part of the program in every State – helping to promote thrifty shopping and healthy eating among food stamp clients.

The evidence is clear that the FSP makes an important difference in the lives of low-income children and families, and the others that it serves. With its nationwide standards for eligibility and benefits, it represents a national nutrition safety net for low-income families and individuals wherever they live. It is designed to expand automatically to respond to increased need when the economy is in recession and contracts when the economy is growing, making sure that food gets to people who need it, when they need it.

Perhaps most importantly, the FSP makes more food available to households that participate. Food stamp families are able to spend more on food than they would be able to without the program, and providing benefits that can be spent only on food increases total food expenditures more than providing an equal amount of cash would. In addition, there is evidence that program participation can increase the availability of nutritious food in the home.

To sum up, Mr. Chairman – the Food Stamp Program works. That's why we're committed to ensuring effective program operations for all eligible people who wish to participate.

To meet that commitment, we have implemented outreach activities such as the national media campaign. The number one reason that people do not apply for food stamp benefits is because they do not realize that they are eligible. The national media campaign seeks to raise awareness of the nutrition benefits of food stamps and encourage low income people to seek out more information about their eligibility for this important benefit.

National media campaign activities primarily consist of radio advertising in low income areas with low participation.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) also provides outreach materials for the Food Stamp Program including posters and flyers, as well as radio and television public service announcements, that State and local food stamp agencies and community and faith-based outreach providers can use in their local outreach efforts.

For the last four years, FNS has also awarded grants to community and faith-based organizations to implement and study promising outreach strategies. All of these outreach strategies are geared towards the working poor, including families with children, seniors, and legal immigrants, including citizen children of undocumented parents. On March 13, Secretary Johanns announced that an additional $5 million in Food Stamp Program grants are available to improve the accessibility and awareness of USDA's Food Stamp Program for low-income households.

In addition to food stamps, FNS administers 14 nutrition assistance programs designed to complement the Food Stamp Program. These programs provide supplemental nutrition assistance for specific population groups. The other major nutrition assistance programs include:

- The Child Nutrition Programs (CNP), including the school meal (lunch and breakfast) program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), support nutritious meals and snacks served to over 31 million children in schools, child care institutions, and after-school care programs each day. In addition, the Summer Food Service (SFSP) Program and parts of the National School Lunch Program provide nutritious food to children in camps and other settings in the summer months, when school is not in session.
- And for the youngest children and infants, we operate the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC. WIC addresses the special needs of at-risk, low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and children up to five years of age. It provides 8

million participants monthly with supplemental food packages targeted to their dietary needs, nutrition education, and referrals to a range of health and social services; benefits that promote a healthy pregnancy for mothers and a healthy start for their children

- We also operate several commodity distribution programs that provide important nutrition support to specific populations. Native Americans have the option of receiving commodity-based food packages in lieu of food stamps. This is especially important for those individuals living on remote reservations with limited access to affordable retail food stores. Likewise, through the Emergency Food Assistance Program, we provide foods and administrative funding to support our nation's network of food banks and soup kitchens—critical resources for families in need of immediate, but temporary, food assistance.

Mr. Chairman, being overweight or obese affects every part of our population, and addressing this problem is most important early in life, when eating and other health-related behaviors are developed. USDA has been providing nutrition guidance for more than a century, and nutrition guidance has evolved with the changing needs of a changing world and advances in our knowledge about nutrition. The policies that shape USDA nutrition assistance programs are aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which are published jointly by the Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture, and revised every five years to ensure that policy is based on current scientific and medical knowledge. They provide sound, science-based advice to promote health and lessen the risk of major chronic diseases.

In fact, we are in the process of updating our program meal patterns to align with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines. Updates to the WIC food package were recently proposed. Later this year, we plan to publish a proposed rule updating the nutrition standards for school meal patterns to bring them in line with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program meal patterns will be updated shortly thereafter.

Other efforts have been taken to promote better nutrition, particularly in the school meal programs. Over the past two decades, USDA has worked to reduce the levels of fat,

sodium, and sugar in the commodities that we make available to schools and other outlets. These commodities are measurably healthier than in years past. Today USDA offers more than 180 quality products to choose from, including whole grains and low-fat foods.

In recent years, USDA pioneered a partnership with the Department of Defense's Supply Center in Philadelphia to deliver over 60 types of fresh fruits and vegetables to schools. Schools have been receiving **$50 million** worth of these products for several years.

USDA established the *HealthierUS School Challenge* to recognize those schools that have demonstrated a commitment to a healthy school nutrition environment. To date, 108 elementary schools have won gold or silver awards for healthy menu planning, often using fruit and vegetable offerings, whole grain products and the lower fat meats offered through the commodity program and for providing students with nutrition education and an opportunity for physical activity. The School Challenge is a component of President Bush's government-wide Healthier US Initiative. The Initiative brings together resources throughout the federal government to help Americans make simple improvements to our nutrition, physical activity and behavior. It calls on government, the private sector, local communities, and individuals to partner together to fight obesity and improve health.

Congress also recognized the role schools can play in curbing childhood obesity by requiring all school districts participating in USDA school meal programs to establish "Wellness Policies". These local wellness policies address the nutrition guidelines for foods sold on campuses, nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities to promote student wellness.

Additionally, each major program promotes healthy eating and active lifestyles through nutrition education and promotion. Nutrition education and services are provided to WIC participants in conjunction with other parts of the WIC benefit to improve birth outcomes and promote childhood immunization, and breastfeeding. Team Nutrition is a comprehensive, integrated plan to promote good nutrition through the Child Nutrition

Programs. Team Nutrition provides nutrition education materials for use in schools and child care centers and technical assistance for food service providers. We also promote nutrition education across programs through the Eat Smart. Play Hard. Campaign, and by working with State agencies that operate the programs on State Nutrition Action Plans, to foster integrated cross-program strategies.

Nutrition education efforts are not limited to the Child Nutrition Programs but are also provided by States to food stamp recipients. The program represents a prime opportunity to reach low-income families and encourage healthy practices that can last a lifetime.

The FSP clearly has been a major benefit to low-income households over the years. Children in the FSP have also benefited from the increased commitment to nutrition education as a component part of the Program. Considered an optional benefit for States, spending in the area of nutrition education has increased over the last fifteen years. For example, in FY 1992, FNS approved $661,000 for Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) efforts conducted by seven State agencies. This year, FNS approved $275 million in federal funds for fifty-two State or State-related agencies to provide FSNE. It is important to note that FSNE plays a valuable role in helping to communicate the Dietary Guidelines for Americans to low-income audiences. This includes promotion of MyPyramid and its various iterations such as MyPyramid for Children and MiPiramide.

To that end, FNS has also developed a series of nutrition education and promotional materials targeting women with children entitled Loving Your Family, Feeding Their Future: Nutrition Education through the Food Stamp Program. These materials are designed for Food Stamp mothers who may possess low levels of literacy and who may be Spanish speakers. These materials can be used in any setting with similar target audiences, such as the WIC Program. The anticipated release date of these materials is May 2007.

The Food Stamp Nutrition Connection is a website designed to provide training and information resources to FSP nutrition educators, and it provides more than 150 nutrition

education resources for children. In January 2007, there were 139,805 hits to this site which represents a 100 percent increase over the previous January.

For a preview of our excellent resource materials please visit our web sites at:

- http://foodstamp.nal.usda.gov
- http://www.fns.usda.gov/eatsmartplayhardkids/Library/actsheets.htm (For children in Spanish and English)

Mr. Chairman, we are using the 2007 Farm Bill process to further improve program access and facilitate future self-sufficiency. The Administration's reform-minded and fiscally responsible proposals build on the successes of the 2002 Farm Bill – which include raising food stamp participation rates among eligible populations, restoring eligibility for many legal immigrants, and providing new flexibility for States to tailor services to better serve their clients. The 2002 Farm Bill improved access, strengthened integrity, and provided careful stewardship of the taxpayer dollars.

For instance, it was my pleasure to award a $1 million grant last year to the Georgia Department of Human Resources to create a web-based food stamp application system in partnership with Georgia Cares in the Division of Aging Services and Christ Lutheran Church, a faith-based organization.

FNS strongly supports State modernization efforts to improve access, integrity, and efficiency. Eleven States have State-wide electronic applications and 3 others are piloting operations. Eighteen States have call centers - and my staff tells me there's a very fine one here in Atlanta.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to take a moment to highlight a few of our 2007 Farm Bill Proposals. These proposals represent the culmination of a great deal of planning and listening to our partners and stakeholders across the country.

We propose to strengthen efforts to integrate nutrition education into the Food Stamp Program by recognizing in the Food Stamp Act of 1977 that nutrition education is a component of the program and investing $100 million to establish a five-year competitive

grants demonstration program targeted at developing and testing solutions to the rising rates of obesity. These grants will allow us to evaluate creative and innovative solutions in this complex area, such as point-of-sale incentives to purchase fruits and vegetables, increased access among food stamp recipients to farmers markets, and integrated initiatives that use multiple communication channels to reinforce key messages. These initiatives would include rigorous evaluations to identify effective strategies. This is important, as the Committee knows, because of the serious health threats of obesity and overweight that threaten American citizens, but is even more critical when we consider the impact it has on our nation's children.

We also propose to change the name of the *Food Stamp Program.* Our State partners administering the Food Stamp Program have been asking the Department for years to consider a name change that is more descriptive of the current Program. Stamps, later replaced by coupons, have not been used for many years and the name does not reflect the Program's mission of reducing hunger and improving nutrition among low-income people. Further, implementation of EBT has made food stamps and the Program name outdated. Finally, some stakeholders suggest that the name is a barrier to participation because of stigma, especially among the elderly. FNS began gathering public comments on a new name in June 2004. While there is no consensus on a new name, the vast majority of the comments supported a name change with certain words commonly included in the suggestions—food and nutrition.

Next, our proposals to increase program access include:

- Eliminating the cap on the dependent care deduction – Current policy supports work or participation in work services by providing for limited deductions from the family's gross income associated with the cost of dependent care when determining food stamp eligibility and benefit amount: a cap of $200 per month for children under 2 and $175 for other dependent children is the current policy. The cap was set back in 1993. It is time to eliminate the cap, which would simplify State administration and help working families with children.

- Excluding the value of college savings plans from the resource limit. This proposal would expand the savings plans eligible for exclusion from the resource limit when determining food stamp eligibility and would simplify administration for the States. Most significantly, it supports working poor, encourages focused savings for children's futures, and recognizes that households should not have to deplete college savings plans in order to get nutrition assistance. This proposal will exclude from the resource calculation the value of college savings plans that the IRS recognizes for tax purposes, including 529 plans operated by most States.
- Excluding combat-related military pay – Enhanced pay from military deployment can sometimes cause families receiving food stamps to no longer be eligible for this assistance. This policy change would ensure that military families are not penalized for doing their patriotic duty. It supports the families of servicemen and servicewomen fighting overseas by ensuring that their families back home do not have their benefits reduced as a result of the additional deployment income. This proposal has been a part of the President's budget for several years and was first enacted in the 2005 Appropriations Act; this farm bill proposal would make this annual policy fix permanent.

- Encouraging savings for retirement –This proposal simplifies food stamp resource policy and makes it more equitable because under current law some retirement accounts are excluded and some are included when determining eligibility. This proposal supports the President's Ownership Society Initiative, by increasing the ability of low-income people to save for retirement. It is expected, when fully implemented, to add approximately 100,000 persons to the program and to increase benefits by $592 million over 5 years. The majority of the new participants will be workers and their families, most with children, but also improves access for elderly.

Beyond the $100 million in obesity-prevention grants, we also propose to improve nutrition for children by:

- Adding new mandatory funding for the purchase of additional fruits and vegetables for use in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. This $500 million of funding over 10 years represents a net increase in the total purchase of fruits and vegetables for school meals over levels available under any other authorities.
- Conducting a survey of foods purchased by school food authorities with Federal cash assistance *once every 5 years*. The most recent data on school food purchases are a decade old. These data would help USDA efforts to 1) provide guidance and technical assistance to school food professionals in the implementation of new rules intended to conform school meal patterns to the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans; 2) better manage the types and varieties of commodities procured by the Department on behalf of schools; and 3) assess the economic impact of school food purchases on various commodity sectors.
- Increasing Section 32 spending on fruits and vegetables by $2.75 billion over 10 years. This proposal will increase the availability of fruits and vegetables to low-income individuals and school children participating in nutrition assistance programs, and the consumption of these healthful foods will contribute to the improved health of program participants. This provision will benefit farmers, as well as schools, soup kitchens, and food banks, after school programs, and other entities that receive USDA commodities. The Emergency Food Assistance Program, known as "TEFAP," would likely be a major beneficiary of this additional funding—which would offset the recent decline in bonus commodities that has affected many TEFAP providers.

- Our Farm Bill proposal also will streamline another food assistance program to improve administration and efficiency by making TEFAP State Plans permanent and allowing States to submit revisions to the plan only when changes occur. This proposal is designed to reduce the paperwork burden for State agencies and increase administrative flexibility.
- USDA is also proposing that TEFAP States use a competitive process to select local agencies, and re-compete grants at least once every three years. Failure to

select local agencies competitively results in barriers to some local organizations, including faith based groups, and can also result in a less effective local TEFAP distribution system in the long run.

In closing Mr. Chairman, these proposals will help us continue to lead the fight against hunger, and the level of commitment to this task remains high. But we still know that there is more to do. We are continuing to improve program operations, get benefits to those who are already eligible, but do not participate, and keep our eye on program integrity in the process.

Thank you for holding this hearing; I am very pleased to be here. I would also like to thank the Atlanta Community Food Bank for allowing us to be here today and for the wonderful work they do in this community. We will be happy to answer any questions you have at this time.

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Testimony of Alan Essig
Executive Director
Georgia Budget and Policy Institute
Atlanta, Georgia

Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Subcommittee on Nutrition and Food Assistance, Sustainable and Organic
Agriculture and General Legislation
"A Field Hearing to Examine Federal Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs"
10:00AM
Tuesday, April 10, 2007
732 Joseph E. Lowery Blvd. NW
Atlanta, Georgia

Mr. Chairman and distinguished committee members:

I am Alan Essig, Executive Director of the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. The Georgia Budget and Policy Institute is an independent, nonprofit, non-partisan organization engaged in research and education on the fiscal and economic health of the state of Georgia. I feel strongly that we must make significant new investments in the Food Stamp Program in this year's Farm Bill to prevent the problem of hunger from becoming even more severe. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the needs of hungry people in Georgia and make some suggestions about how the Food Stamp Program can be strengthened in the Farm Bill.

I especially want to thank Senator Saxby Chambliss for his leadership on this Committee in recent years. He has been a true champion of the Food Stamp Program and, as Chair of the Committee, refused to take food stamps away from hungry people two years ago even under intense budgetary pressure.

We particularly appreciate Senator Chambliss' deep understanding of how food stamps support not only the people who are able to put food on the table using their benefits, but also the farmers who produce the food, the grocers who sell it, and the economy as a whole. As Senator Chambliss said a couple of years ago, "Whether it is buying milk in the store or buying bacon or bread or whatever, it's the farmers that get the real benefit because of utilization of the FSP, so it's a win-win program."

And the Food Stamp Program is a win-win for Georgia. The Food Stamp Program pumped $1.047 billion into the Georgia economy in 2005, benefiting farmers, grocers, and small businesses throughout the state. A USDA study found that every $5 in new food stamp benefits generates $9.20 in economic activity in the community.

The Food Stamp Program is the nation's largest food assistance program and nationally, more than 26 million people use food stamps to purchase food from local retailers. In Georgia the Food Stamp Program helps over 921,000 residents buy food each month.

While the Food Stamp Program has been successful in virtually eliminating the severe hunger that was seen in the United States in the 1960's, it is important to realize that the working poor continue to struggle to meet the most basic of human needs — food — and depend on the Food Stamp Program to bridge that gap.

Yet, although Georgia continues to approach the national average in median income, thousands of Georgians find it difficult to make ends meet and often struggle to purchase adequate food. In Georgia, we have the 14th worst rate of food insecurity in the nation. USDA has found that more than 12 percent of Georgia households as "food insecure" — what most people would call hungry.

There are a few reasons why Georgians face such difficulty buying adequate food. First, wages are too low to pay the escalating costs of raising a family, making food stamps essential to helping Georgia's working-poor families make ends meet. When combined with the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, food stamps enable a family supported by a minimum-wage, full-time worker to approach the poverty line.

Second, even people who get food stamps frequently find that the benefit is not enough to get them through the month — due to a cut made in 1996 and that remains in effect today, the benefit buys less food with each passing year. Research has shown that food stamp households are very thrifty shoppers. Yet, the benefit typically lasts only two or three weeks. After that they must ration food, skip meals, and resort to cheap foods which are often filling but low in nutrients.

The Senate Agriculture Committee recognized this problem and took steps to ameliorate it in the 2002 Farm Bill by indexing the standard deduction for larger households. This year the Senate should finish the job and index the deduction for all households. While it will not restore benefits to the level they should be, had the deduction not been frozen, it will prevent the benefit from further erosion.

And third, many people who need help can't get it due to federal eligibility rules. Senator Chambliss has sponsored an important bill, S591, which would increase the amounts of financial resources an eligible households can have and exclude certain retirement and education accounts. This piece of legislation would make more needy families eligible for benefits and represents an important first step in strengthening the program and making it more responsive to the needs of low income people.

However, it is only a first step. Vulnerable Georgians need this and much more.

THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM TODAY

Food Insecurity

Food security, defined as "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life" by the Census Bureau has grown in recent years. According to the most recent survey on

food security, 38 million Americans, or 11.9 percent of all households, lived in households that were food insecure in 2004. Census Bureau data shows that an estimated 408,729 households in Georgia live with hunger or the threat of hunger.

That amounts to 12.3 percent of all households in Georgia and includes senior citizens living on fixed incomes and low-income working families struggling to make ends meet. These vulnerable Georgians find that their wages or Social Security are not enough to cover rent, utilities, medicine, and other basics, and still buy food for their family.

For children not having enough food can be particularly devastating because they need proper nutrients and quantities of food to help them develop cognitively, physically, and emotionally. A recent pediatricians' report documented that infants and toddlers in families whose food stamp benefits have been reduced or terminated are more than twice as likely to experience food insecurity as comparable children whose food stamp benefits have been maintained. The report went on to warn that food insecurity contributes to young children's poor health: "even mild to moderate under-nutrition in young children is linked to problems that last throughout the lifespan." Food Stamps "help to protect young children from the harmful health effects of food insecurity," the report stated.

These realities are exacerbated by growth in low-wage service jobs and industries that often do not provide healthcare benefits, paid time off, or upward mobility. The broader economic outlook for the nation and Georgia put low-income families in a very vulnerable position and increase the need for food assistance programs such as the Food Stamp Program.

Foods Stamps and Working Poor Families

I cannot emphasize enough how important food stamps are to working-poor families with children. About 80 percent of food stamp benefits go to households with children, many of them in working families. Most of the rest go to households containing elderly people or people with disabilities.

According to 2005 Kids Count Georgia ranks 34th out of 50 states for children living in poverty. Of all children in Georgia 20 percent live in households with incomes below 100 percent of the federal poverty line and 21 percent live in households with incomes between 100 and 200 percent of the federal poverty line.

This means that almost half of all Georgia's children live in low incomes households. Regardless if the child lives in an urban or rural area makes little difference. 57 percent of children in urban areas live in low-income families and 56 percent of children in rural areas live in low-income families. Children in suburban area only fare slightly better with 37 percent living in low-income households.

Of low income households, 44 percent of the parents either work part-time or seasonally or are not employed at all. Furthermore, 85 percent of children whose parents do not have high a school diploma live in low income households and 60 percent of children whose parents do have

a high school diploma but no college education live in low income families. These families are at particularly high risk for food insecurity.

Even a full time worker can't support a family on wages alone. The annual earnings of a full-time minimum wage worker bring the take-home pay of a family of four to just under half the poverty line. Even with the earned income tax credit (EITC), the family will still be at only about 70 percent of the poverty line. Moreover, the EITC typically comes as a single lump-sum refund, while families need help buying food throughout the year. However, food stamps, when combined with full time work and EITC, can help the family approach the poverty line.

Even as the real value of wages has eroded in recent years, low wage household face increasing costs, not only for housing and fuel, but child care, as well. The Georgia Department of Human Resources has had a waiting list for subsidized childcare for some time now which means many low-income families must pay this high cost out of pocket. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about one-quarter of poor families with employed mothers pay for child care and "[a]mong families who paid for child care, those below the poverty level spent roughly three times the percentage of their income on child care as other families (25 percent compared with 7 percent).

The U.S. Census Bureau also further finds that the average child care cost for employed mothers with family income below the poverty level who paid for child care was about $290 a month in 2002. In 2006, after adjusting for the rate of inflation of the Consumer Price Index for Child Care and Nursery Schools, the average cost of child care for poor mothers rose to almost $350 a month. For low-income working families who have preschool or young children school age children, high quality, affordable child care is a critical work support for finding and keeping employment and gaining true self-sufficiency.

The Administration's budget this year included an important proposal to help these household by adjusting food stamps calculations to more accurately to reflect the skyrocketing cost of childcare. The provision would allow households to deduct the full amount of child care costs they incur. Currently, that amount is capped at $175 per month per child for children over 2 ($200 per month per child for younger children), levels that have not been changed or adjusted for inflation since 1993.

As more and more Georgians struggle to get by on low wage jobs, it become increasingly important to make participating in the Food Stamp Program easier for low wage workers and their families.

Eroding Value of Benefits

In Georgia, the benefit is $1.07 per person per meal. How can anyone live off $1.07 a meal for a whole month, let alone purchase an adequate and nutritious diet? The fact that the benefit level is extremely low and has not been raised in recent history is only the tip of the iceberg when considering the true value of the food stamp benefit. Due to benefit cuts enacted as part of the 1996 welfare law, the purchasing power of most households' food stamp benefits is eroding in

value each year which means that families are forced to buy less food with less money. Low-income families with less purchasing power have limited ability to maintain a healthy diet consisting of more fruits and vegetables, because less nutritious foods cost less and are more filling. This forces families to stretch the limited resources they have and make less expensive purchases of less nutritious foods.

This Committee heard recently from Rhonda Stewart, a food stamp participant from Ohio, who spoke eloquently about the struggle to stretch the food stamp benefit to last the month, and the difficult choices she has to make. Georgians face these same choices every day during that last two weeks of the month when the food stamps are gone — between paying the utility bills or buying milk, between going hungry or depriving the children of the available food.

This puts the health of an already vulnerable population-- growing children and ailing elderly, at a greater risk. This policy can also put a financial strain on programs like Medicaid and Medicare that provide most of the health care coverage to low-income Americans.

The value of the benefits is eroding over time due to a cut enacted in 1996. Food Stamp Program budget calculations allowed for families to utilize a standard deduction that subtracted the basic costs of housing, utilities, transportation, and other inescapable living expenses that otherwise cannot be used to purchase food. This deduction, in its previous form, was a crucial helping hand for financially strapped families. Prior to 1996 the deduction was indexed each year to account for inflation, in recognition of the fact that living expenses rise with inflation. However, the 1996 welfare legislation froze the standard deduction at $134 for all household. In the 2002 Farm Bill, the Seante recognized this problem and took the first tsteps towards correcting it by improving the standard deduction to assist larger families; however, the deduction remains frozen for families with three or fewer members.

In 2008, food stamp benefits for a typical working parent with two children will be $37 a month lower than they would have been without the across-the-board benefit cuts included in the 1996 law. To restore purchasing power of food stamp benefits, the standard deduction needs to be raised from $134 to $188 in 2008 and annually adjusted for inflation. In Georgia, the benefits lost due to the erosion of the standard deduction since the 1996 welfare bill will reach $58 million by 2008, $301 million between 2008 and 2012, and a staggering $711 million between 2008 and 2017. A typical household for three or fewer members would see its benefit increase by $24 month if this adjustment is made.

The erosion of benefits makes it harder and harder for low income people to purchase a healthy diet. However, an increased benefit level coupled with nutrition education can help to foster healthy food choices and healthier life styles. Increased resources and good food choices for struggling families can ultimately result in taxpayer's paying less in the long run for other low-income support programs like Medicaid and Medicare by mitigating the prevalence of nutrition related illnesses.

Food Stamps and the Economy

The Food Stamp Program not only benefits the participants, but also the national and state economy, which benefits all Georgia residents. Nationally, the $28.6 billion of federal food benefits that were spent in local stores and farmers' markets in fiscal year 2005 generated an estimated $52.6 billion in economic activity and created an estimated 173,000 farm jobs, according to USDA.

The Food Stamp Program pumped $1.047 billion into the Georgia economy in 2005, benefiting farmers, grocers, and small businesses throughout the state. A USDA study found that every $5 in new food stamp benefits generates $9.20 in spending in the community. Every $1 billion of food stamp spending results in increased demand for food that creates 3,300 farm jobs — in addition to the new jobs it helps create in supermarkets and other related industries. According to these estimates, food stamp spending generated $52.6 billion in economic activity and created 173,000 farm jobs in fiscal year 2004. In addition, as exhibited during the recent recession and subsequent weak recovery, Food Stamp program participation in Georgia increased. In 2000, an average of 559, 468 Georgians received food stamps each month. That number rose steadily to 946,812 in 2006, an increase of 67 percent.

Food Stamp Participation

The USDA has made improving food stamp participation a priority because of the nutritional benefits it would bring to new participants and the economic benefits it would bring to local communities. According to a recent USDA report, an increase in participation of as little as five percentage points would make a big difference. Such an increase would provide food stamps to an additional 57,000 low-income Georgians, bringing $39.4 million to the local economy in Georgia. This would result in a total of $72.5 million in new economic activity in Georgia.

In 2004, the most recent year for which national data are available, only 60 percent of people eligible for food stamps received them. Participation rates are particularly low among eligible working households (47 percent) and seniors (28 percent). In Georgia, an estimated 67 percent of those eligible for food stamps participated in fiscal year 2004.

Among eligible low wage workers, participation is even lower. Only 57 percent of eligible low wage workers participate. Almost 90 percent of food stamp households have income under the poverty level. The rest have income slightly above the poverty level, but their basic expenses are high enough to make them eligible for a small food stamp benefit.

There are numerous reasons why eligible people do not receive food stamps. Many people do not participate in the Food Stamp Program because they do not realize they are eligible. In addition, working people may not be able to get time off from work to apply, and people in rural areas may have transportation barriers. Some people do not want to accept government assistance. Immigrants may not realize that their U.S. citizen children are eligible for food stamps, or may have language barriers that prevent them from learning about the program. Seniors may not apply for benefits because they think someone else needs the help more.

Despite the need to improve access to the Food Stamp Program as indicated above, the number of food stamp participants in Georgia has grown substantially over the past few years. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, the average number of monthly participants in the food stamp program increased 47 percent between 2002 and 2006 which reflects the recent recession and subsequent weak recovery. As more and more Georgians struggle to get by on low wage jobs, it become increasingly important to make participating in the Food Stamp Program easier for low wage workers and their families.

Food Stamps and Natural Disasters

Food stamps also provide crucial assistance to individuals in times of natural disaster as the USDA was able to quickly issue close to $1 billion in disaster food stamps to 2.2 million households that survived Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma in 2005. Because the authority to do this is written into the Food Stamp Program, USDA is able to prepare to issue disaster benefits even before the disaster strikes, and without waiting for a Presidential declaration of disaster or Congressional action. Georgia alone received $2.9 million in food stamp benefits for Hurricane Katrina evacuees covering 19,400 households.

Food Stamp Program is Efficient

For those who are recipients of the Food Stamp Program it is one of the most efficiently administered programs in the federal government. As pointed out in an article by Jerry Hagstrom, of the National Journal entitled "Successes: A Government Reform That Worked," Hagstrom rightly points out that according to the USDA, the state agencies that determine eligibility and distribute benefits have become so much more efficient in certifying eligibility that the payment error rate has gone down from 10.7 percent in 1998 to 5.48 percent in 2005. Moreover, greater than 98 percent of food stamp benefits go to eligible households.

However, as efficient and successful as the Food Stamp Program currently is, I believe there are numerous improvements that must be made during this year's reauthorization to improve access and mitigate benefit erosion.

Farm Bill Recommendations

The Food Stamp Program is the first defense against hunger and food insecurity during economic downturns, natural disasters, and everyday struggles of the working poor who fight to earn a living. It is the largest food assistance program in the country, and our largest child nutrition program.

With that in mind I would like to purpose a few recommendations for improving the Food Stamp Program for future generations of working poor-families and those temporarily affected by economic shifts and natural disasters.

1) I'd like to first strongly encourage Congress to strengthen the food stamp benefit dollar amount. The benefit of $1.07 per person per meal in Georgia is already deeply inadequate, and the benefit is losing purchasing power every year.

The 1996 welfare legislation froze the standard deduction at $134 for all household. In the 2002 Farm Bill, the Senate took an important first step, improving the standard deduction for larger families. The Senate proposal to stop the erosion for all households did not survive the legislative process in 2002; now it is time to finish the job. Georgians will lose $53 million in benefits in 2008 due to the erosion of the standard deduction since 1996. That amount will reach $301 million between 2008 and 2012, and a staggering $711 million between 2008 and 2017.

At a minimum, Congress should index the standard deduction, so that the purchasing power of the benefit will stop eroding. The households that would be helped by this change would not regain any of the ground lost since 1996, but the real value of their food stamp benefits would stop deteriorating further with each passing year. This would mean that by fiscal year 2017 a typical working family of three would receive about $11 more per month that it would under current law. Households of two would start to see an increase ten years earlier than under current law. Moreover, almost of all of the increased benefits in the first five years would go to households with children.

The cost of this modest improvement would be about $1.3 billion over five years. Almost half of the benefits from this change (45 percent) would go to families with children. Slightly more than half would go to households with an elderly or disabled member. I understand this would be a costly benefit increase but the cost of not increasing would be even greater over time if not addressed now.

Stopping the erosion of benefits is a vital part of efforts to reduce hunger and improve the nutritional status of food stamp participants.

2) Too many people in our communities need food stamps but cannot get them. This includes working poor families with savings slightly above outdated resource limits and those with certain retirement or educational savings accounts. We appreciate Senator Chambliss' leadership in introducing an important bill to address some of these issues. Also excluded are many legal immigrants, who are here playing by all the rules but cannot get help when they fall on hard times. Also, very poor childless adults face a three month time limit -- even if they are looking for work but cannot find it.

Congress should restore benefits to all people who are legally in the country and poor enough to need the assistance.

3) I would like to endorse the President's proposal to adjust food stamps calculations to more accurately to reflect the skyrocketing cost of childcare in America. The Administration's proposal would allow households that must pay the high cost of childcare out of pocket to deduct the full cost of that care from their income when determining their level of food stamp benefits. For low-income parents with young children cannot keep jobs and become self-sufficient without

high quality, affordable child care. This proposal would help these families bear the high costs of child care without sacrificing food.

The Senate should eliminate the cap on the child care deduction.

4) I would also like to join this Committee's opposition to the President's proposal to eliminate 300,000 low income people from the program by stripping states of flexibility provided in the 1996 welfare law, which allows states to coordinate certain aspects of eligibility for the Food Stamp Program with eligibility rules used for state TANF programs. Some low-income households in more than half the states that have adopted the option would have their food stamp assistance terminated as a result of this proposal, including 1436 people in Georgia.

States would be required to terminate food stamps for households that participate in a TANF-funded program (other than welfare cash assistance) and have very low net incomes. Those affected generally would be one of the most vulnerable groups the program serves — working families with children that are receiving some kind of TANF-funded support. In Georgia 811 children would lose food stamps, as well as 625 adults and elderly people.

The President's budget documents describe this change as "improving the integrity of the Food Stamp Program by tightening overly broad waivers from eligibility criteria." However, those who would lose eligibility under the provision are not committing fraud. They live in households in which the net monthly income is below the poverty line. They fully qualify for food stamps under a state option made available to states as part of the 1996 welfare law and that should not change.

This Committee has rejected this cut every time the President has proposed it and should continue to protect these vulnerable households.

5) Congress should work hard to reduce access barriers to the Food Stamp Program. In Georgia, only 67 percent of all households who are eligible for food stamps received the benefit. The participation rate for the working poor is even lower at 57 percent. Populations such as the working poor, seniors and legal immigrants are not applying for benefits because they may think they are not eligible, others may be in more need, or may be scared of asking for assistance for fear of reprisal against their legal immigration status, which is simple not true.

The 2002 farm bill made strides to reduce paperwork and inconvenient office-visits requirements for working poor households and should be applauded for these efforts. However, the same allowances should be made available to the elderly and disabled. The 2002 provision that allows residents to apply over the Internet should be expanded to the telephone. Congress may even want to consider extending the automatic certification to all elderly or disabled people receiving social security insurance so that these individuals can receive benefits without having to apply separately.

CONCLUSION

I'm not an expert on the Farm Bill, but it seems likely that many changes will be made to the bill as it moves through the legislative process, and those changes should be evaluated on their merits. Clearly there's a great deal of merit to our proposals to improve food stamps. Further, we assume some resources will become available as the final bill is crafted; one proposal that would generate savings and that should get significant discussion is limiting payments to very wealthy farmers. I believe that a share of any resources that become available in the bill should go for food stamp improvements.

In closing I want to thank the Committee for taking the time to learn about the importance of the Food Stamp Program. I also want to thank you for your consideration of the recommendations for the 2007 Farm Bill to stop the erosion of benefit, simplify enrollment, and to make adjustments for child care costs. We have an opportunity through the 2007 Farm Bill to move closer to eliminating hunger in America.

Written Testimony
of
Mary Dean Harvey, Director
of the
Georgia Department of Human Resources
Division of Family and Children Services

Before the

Senate Agriculture Committee

Hearing on the Food Stamp Program

April 10, 2007

Georgia DHR Testimony

Thank you. It's a pleasure to address this committee, and an even greater pleasure to have you here with us in Georgia. I think you'll find, as I have, that Georgians earn their reputation for hospitality, caring concern, and a common purpose rooted in faith. Wedded to that genuine compassion is also a stubborn practicality that demands results. In the Food Stamp Program we have both.

Food Stamps can be the difference between children who get a good start in life – and those born weighing too little. Between students who can absorb and learn at school – and those whose spirit is absent because their bodies are deprived. Between having the basic necessities of life – and choosing whether to have food, electricity, or transportation this month. Between a retirement spent among friends and family in one's own home – and a decline into dependence because of poor nutrition and fading health.

In other words, the Food Stamp Program is the cornerstone of all social services – and contributes to people's lives far beyond the dinner table. Invited to address you today, we thought we'd focus on a few enhancements that would make a great program even better, and promote good outcomes in other areas of human services as well. Like a team member that excels in his or her job, we see other ways the FSP can contribute to the larger goal of overall wellbeing for families and individuals. Today we'll focus on three areas: expanding the use of technology; strengthening the focus on building self-sufficiency; and improving the way we serve the elderly.

The focus dual focus of the program is expanding access and ensuring quality by reducing errors. We believe every state would see immediate benefits in both of those areas with a greater investment in technology. In the past it was true that low-income citizens had little access to technology. When cell phones came in satchels and internet providers charged by the minute, it was easy to think that technology didn't matter to this population. Today the world is different; the use of technology pervasive. That gives us a tremendous advantage and new opportunities to do better work.

Thanks to a $1 Million Food Stamp Program Participation Grant from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service and $2 Million from Governor Perdue and the Georgia Technology Authority, Georgia will soon make it possible for consumers to begin the food stamp application process, report changes in household income, schedule interview appointments, and receive a checklist of verification items they'll need – all on the web.

There are certain things only our workers can do, such as conducting interviews with applicants and approving their applications. And then there are things that anyone can do, such as typing in their own personal information. If we can process 35% of applications online each year, we'll save our workers approximately 240,000 hours. That means they'll be able to do a lot more of the

things only they can do, improving quality, and reducing errors. It also will cut down the wait time for applicants, making it easier and more convenient to access the benefits of the Food Stamp Program.

There's another benefit as well, one we've seen already with the EBT cards. There's a great difference between managing an account and waiting for a checl to arrive in the mail. Technology has the ability to give clients more control over and greater participation in the services they receive.

Employing technology is a good first step in instilling self-sufficiency, but only a beginning. The FSP itself is even more important in that regard – so important that strengthening its focus on self-sufficiency would have a positive impact on other human services.

We'd like to see FSP services for ABAWDs – the Able Bodies Adults Without Dependents – function more like TANF. The combination of stricter requirement and more expansive assistance has helped Georgia reach a TANF work participation rate of 68.1%, with many counties having no mandated adults at all. And because of enhanced welfare-to-work supports such as job coaching and transitional supports, they are able to stay employed; those returning to TANF represent about 8% of the total client population. As one of the most useful and reliable tools in our human services toolbox, the FSP could do even better work for us with enhanced work requirements and incentives.

Another good example of strengthening self-sufficiency is our Fatherhood Program. Congress decades ago recognized how important child support is to making sure children are raised in economically self-sufficient households. It also happens to be the case that children who are raised with some kind of relationship with their fathers – and most of our non-custodial parents are fathers – are far, far better off: boys less likely to wind up in jail, girls less likely to get pregnant as teens, and both more likely to finish high school. So child support is something we take very seriously.

Our Fatherhood Program invests in training and educational programs for father and mothers to help them get better-paying jobs so they can meet their child support obligations and be a bigger part of their children's lives. This year so far we've had over 2,300 participants, 60% of whom have gotten new or better jobs. We're even reaching out to prison populations to who are getting ready to transition back into society.

What the Fatherhood Program accomplishes is greater self-sufficiency for children and their custodial parent as well as for the non-custodial parent. Children benefit from a sustained relationship with their fathers, which produces even greater social good. All of this from giving noncustodial parents the help to get a better job.

The larger point is that to help boost clients into better lives, we must not only feed them today, but give them the ability to feed themselves tomorrow.

For those who are past their working years, the Food Stamp Program becomes an even more important source of support and sustenance. The elderly are one of our most vulnerable populations, and their ranks are growing. Many of them live on small, fixed incomes, but because they may have other benefits, such as Social Security, they often qualify only for the minimum food stamp benefit – jus $10 a month. In fact, 62% of the people receiving the minimum benefit in Georgia are single persons over the age of 60.

The good news is that we have a minimum benefit to offer them. The bad news is that it hasn't been adjusted since 1974. That $10 today has approximately one-fourth of the buying power as it did back then. For the cost of a quart of mil a dozen eggs, and a loaf of bread in 1974, today you might be able to get a half pint of milk, 3 eggs, and enough bread for a couple of sandwiches.

We believe the single most effective thing to help seniors would be to raise that minimum benefit to at least $25 a month. That would not only increase the valu of the benefit in proportion to increased costs, but it would also make it more likely that seniors would apply and continue participating in the program. With everything involved in getting to the office and filling out the paperwork, it's not surprising that some seniors would decide it's not worth $10 a month. So they choose to skip the program entirely – and skip a few meals as well.

Increasing the asset limit would also help seniors in respect to the amount of benefits they can qualify for. People are living longer, with life expectancy climbing to nearly 78 years. They'll need the homes, IRAs, and everything they've managed to save to make it. We can make food stamps even more valuable to them by taking that into account.

We also need to consider their unique circumstances and the role they continue to play in the lives of their families and our communities. Today, more than 164,000 children in Georgia are living in a household headed by a grandparent, children who might otherwise be in the foster care system. We'd rather have them in the loving arms of family, and grandparents can provide that. Through our department-wide Grandparents Raising Grandchildren initiative, we prioritize those seniors for many services, give them an extra $50 a month above and beyond what relative placements usually receive, and make available an initial lump-sum payment to help make their homes ready to raise children again. Enhanced food stamp benefits would help both those seniors and the children they care for.

I cannot begin to imagine how we would do our jobs as social service providers without the FSP. On the contrary, what I can easily imagine is how we could make it an even more integral part of our overall package for strengthening

families and making individuals more self sufficient. We believe that with a few enhancements, that will happen in Georgia and across the country.

In addition, we would encourage you to think of new ways to help drive our work in that direction. Holding states accountable with penalties is necessary but not sufficient to optimize the Food Stamp Program and expand its impact. Balancing those with additional incentives can give all of us something higher to reach for, producing better long term social outcomes and paying dividends to America for a long time to come.

Thank you. I'd be glad to answer any questions.

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Testimony of Taquana Spicer before the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, U.S. Senate, April 10, 2007.

To the Chairman and Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen of the Senate, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Please let me begin by introducing myself. My name is Taquana Spicer and I live in Clayton County, Georgia. I work as an administrative assistant with Hearts to Nourish Hope, a non-profit agency that offers services to at-risk youth. I've obtained my position through the TANF work program, and I've been with my organization for four years. I also have three children, ages 10, 6, and 2.

Before I obtained my current position, I was out of work and found myself living in a shelter in Fulton County with my children. I was in the shelter for six months, and during that time I could not find a job. I was finally able to move out to Clayton County with my mother's help – she had received a small amount of back child support from my father, and used the money to help me find housing. But while I was moving, I missed an appointment to transfer my TANF and Food Stamps cases from Fulton to Clayton County and my benefits were terminated. I found myself living in Clayton County with no job, no benefits and no food for my children. When I had so little money that I could not afford bus fare, I walked four and a half hours to the local DFACS office to re-apply for my benefits. At that time I was enrolled in the Clayton County TANF work program. Because I wasn't given emergency food stamps at that time, the woman in charge of the TANF work program, Diane Danley, bought me $50.00 worth of groceries to get me through the month, and I will always be grateful for her assistance. Ms. Danley also decided that it would be better for me to obtain clerical experience, rather than finding another job as a sales clerk. She placed me in my current position with Hearts to Nourish Hope, and I was eventually given a full-time position.

I love my job and working with my organization. We help older children who are at-risk - providing GED classes, counseling, help with homework and a place to go after school. I love the children, and I see how many of them are in the same position I was in when I was their age. I want to help them go about things in a different way than I did. I also love my co-workers and my boss, and I feel so lucky to work where I do.

In my position with Hearts to Nourish Hope I work full-time, and take home pay is approximately $960 a month. My rent is $700 a month, plus I have expenses for child care, utilities, and public transportation, as well as for the children's clothing and supplies. I do not receive any child support. Without my monthly allotment of food stamps, which is $462, I would not be able to make ends meet. If my food stamps were cut, even by $50, I wouldn't be able to pay some other bill, such as my lights, gas, or even rent. I always use plenty of coupons when I shop, and I typically buy my food at Wal Mart. Because I buy bulk foods, they last a lot longer. I usually spend $150-175 every two weeks on groceries. Sometimes I have enough food for my children, and sometimes I don't, it typically depends on whether or not the children are out of school. Because they eat breakfast and lunch at school, I have a harder time during holidays or on the weekends. I am currently worried about spring break week, which is coming up soon. Food Stamps are so important for someone like me.

I am very hopeful that one day I will no longer have to receive Food Stamps. I obtained my GED in 1999, and am going to go back to school this fall to study in business administration. I plan to attend Shorter College, and am optimistic that going back to school will lead to an increase in my income. In the meantime, the help I receive from the Food Stamps Program will enable me to achieve my goals. I also want the best for my children, and what I want most for them is that they won't have receive Food Stamps when they are adults. I also want to be able to provide them with the things that they need and good, nutritious food. I am grateful to the food stamps program for helping me be able to do this, and I want to thank you for your generous support of the program. I know many other people who are like me, who work hard, and who need just a little bit of help to make a better life for themselves and their children.

Thank you for your time and allowing me to tell me story. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

April 10, 2007

SCHOOL NUTRITION Fax:404-657-9188 Apr 17 2007 14:45 P.02

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School Nutrition Program

Kathy Cox, State Superintendent of Schools

April 13, 2007

The Honorable Saxby Chambliss
United States Senate
416 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Chambliss:

Thank you for conducting the Agricultural Committee Field Hearing at the Atlanta Community Food Bank as a part of developing policy on the "Farm Bill." I would like to submit the following comments for inclusion in the record, since you indicated that it would remain open for five days. First, on behalf of the School Nutrition Program administrated by the Georgia Department of Education, I would like to thank you for your interest and commitment to meeting the nutritional needs of children in Georgia. We look forward to Georgia being added to the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. We recognize that not only will this program provide healthy foods for our students; it will promote healthy eating habits that will last for a lifetime.

While the school lunch program receives eighteen cents (18 cents) per meal in USDA commodity support, the breakfast program does not receive any commodity support. Providing USDA commodities to the school breakfast program would not only assist the program and benefit students, it would also benefit Georgia's agricultural community. Please consider this need for these commodities in the "Farm Bill" as well.

Sincerely,

Ruth Gordon

Ruth W. Gordon, Director
School Nutrition Program

RG:mj
cc: Kathy Cox, State Superintendent of Schools
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THE CENTER FOR PAN ASIAN COMMUNITY SERVICES, INC.
Trung Tâm Phục Vụ Cộng Đồ`ng Á Đông 泛亞社區服務中心 애틀란타 한인봉사센타

Senator Tom Harkin (Democrat-Ia.)
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

April 09, 2007

Dear Honorable Tom Harkin:

We, at the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc. in Doraville Georgia, are concerned about the restrictions on legal immigrant eligibility for Food Stamps. My name is Judy Yi, Program Director of our agency. Part of my job is to help immigrant families facing hunger to apply for Food Stamps.

On a weekly basis, our agency has to turn away individuals/families because they do not have the "qualified immigrant" status (residing in the U.S. for five years). Often times, we receive phone calls or have walk-ins with individuals/families who have worked, are legal residents and low-income. Some of these clients have no choice but to work endlessly in menial low-paying jobs, despite health issues, because they cannot afford to lose a paycheck. Yet, they still face poverty and hunger because they are not qualified for food stamps. It is vitally important to the communities we work with here in Georgia, that Congress repeal the bars to Food Stamp eligibility for legal immigrants.

Immigrants pay taxes, work hard, and make vital contributions to the United States and should not be subject to special restrictions that prevent them from securing basic food assistance when they need it. According to the February 2005 Economic Report of the President, "summing up the economic benefits and costs of immigration shows that over time, the benefits of immigration exceed the costs."

America was built by immigrants. We, from the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, are speaking on behalf of the many immigrants who cannot speak for themselves. Our organization respectfully requests that Congress end the restrictions on legal immigrant eligibility for Food Stamps. We have every confidence that you will push for bills that are consistent with American values and protect the livelihood of all Americans.

Sincerely,

Judy Yi
Program Director
Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc.

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