



Assembly Human Services Committee, September 22, 2014
Testimony of
Serena Rice, Executive Director
Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey

Good afternoon Chairwoman Huttle, Vice-chair Tucker, and members of the committee. I am Serena Rice, Executive Director of the Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey, a broad-based coalition of organizations and individuals committed to the prevention, reduction and end of poverty in New Jersey. On behalf of the Anti-Poverty Network I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak about the importance of providing timely SNAP benefits to our hungry neighbors.

Hunger is perhaps the most immediate and relatable symptom of poverty in our society. It is *immediate* because hunger is a need that cannot be put off to tomorrow. Our human bodies are made to need refueling several times a day, and an empty wallet cannot convince an empty stomach to postpone its hunger pangs. Hunger is also *relatable* because it is not too far removed from every day experience for us to comprehend it. Certainly, any parent knows the tones of desperation that color the whines of our children when we ask them to wait just another 30 minutes until dinner. Sadly, for some children that dinner is not coming at all tonight. This knowledge should give a powerful urgency to our conversation.

But despite this familiarity, it is all too easy to distance ourselves from the pain of hunger when we enter the world of policy discussions. Thirty-day approval processes become a matter of federal compliance and computer system backlogs. While that compliance is important, and the technical tools for case processing demand our attention, they can also distance us from the reality of hunger.

As a remedy to that distance, I want to offer a few brief reflections from a research project I was privileged to participate in a few years ago. The Poverty Research Institute of Legal Services of New Jersey interviewed over 80 households

with low- and moderate-incomes about the challenges they faced in making ends meet.¹ Hunger was one of the challenges the respondents spoke about again and again. They spoke about forgoing entire food groups, like fruit and meat, because they just couldn't afford them. They spoke about cutting their own portions or skipping meals so that there would be enough food for their children. They spoke about eating their one meal a day in the evening, because it's too hard to sleep on an empty stomach. And they spoke about the deep anxiety of not knowing how they were going to get enough food to make it through the month.

One mother shared what this felt like: "I live in constant fear that I'm not going to have enough to feed [my kids]. Constant. That is an every day, every minute of every day fear of mine that I'm not going to have enough to feed my kids.... There's nothing worse than that helpless feeling."

Such helplessness is truly horrible. Thankfully, we are not helpless to do something about hunger, because we have ample evidence that the SNAP program is a very effective anti-hunger program. The stories I heard in household interviews reinforced the findings of larger national studies. SNAP benefits make a huge difference. One mother interviewed for the study talked about how "wonderful" food stamps were before she took a second job that raised her income above the eligibility threshold. Ironically, when she took the second job she had to start diluting meals and giving up categories of food because the extra income did not make up for the loss of SNAP benefits. Across all of the respondents, receiving SNAP assistance was the biggest difference in the experience of hunger. Families in both groups supplemented the food budgets with emergency assistance, help from families, and various cost-cutting strategies, and both groups still sometimes fell short, but receipt of food stamps meant having a reliable monthly resource – one that was not going to run out of food before they got there or require taking unpaid time off of work to collect it. All this is not to understate the value of emergency feeding programs, but I am sure my colleagues from those programs will tell you themselves. Emergency food cannot take the place of SNAP benefits. SNAP is the

¹ The full report is available in pdf form online at:
<http://www.lsnj.org/PDFs/PovertyResearchInstitute/IncomeInadequacyReport.pdf>

most effective tool we have directly lessen hunger. Our job, as a state and a society, is to make sure that it is working for everyone who is eligible to receive it.

When I was asked to testify, I was asked to speak about the need for SNAP and the impact of application processing delays. I thought about bringing you the statistics on food insecurity to prove how great the need is. I thought about highlighting New Jersey's state ranking in processing times to prove that it is clearly possible to do a better job. But ultimately, I decided to bring you these stories because the need is not about numbers. It is about hunger. And when we are talking about hunger, when we are really thinking about what it means to be hungry, we will realize that even 30 days is a lifetime.

Thank you for your time and attention.