



Testimony
Appropriations Committee
February 17, 2012

Good evening, Senator Harp, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Nancy Carrington and I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of Connecticut Food Bank.

Connecticut Food Bank is the largest source of emergency food in the state of Connecticut. Now in our 30th year of operation, we distribute food and grocery items through a network of 600 local, grassroots programs in six of Connecticut's eight counties: Fairfield, Litchfield, Middlesex, New London, New Haven and Windham. Last year we distributed almost 17 million pounds of food, an average of 33 tons of product every business day. Yet we haven't alleviated hunger.

Our job has become more challenging over the last few years. The economy has impacted hundreds of thousands of Connecticut residents. The USDA now estimates that more than 400,000 of our neighbors, who are your constituents, are food insecure. One in five children is living in a household where there is not enough to eat, and sometimes nothing to eat.

Additionally, with Feeding America, we analyzed the Connecticut data on hunger and determined that 52% of Connecticut's food-insecure residents do not qualify for federal food assistance programs such as SNAP (food stamps), WIC or free/reduced price school lunches because their incomes are too high, even though their expenses put them in the precarious positions of making difficult choices between necessities, such as heat, medicine or food.

The problem of hunger is in every community in this wealthy state. Last year, 55% of our food pantry distribution went to suburbs and small towns. People who used to donate money and food to the Food Bank or their local food assistance program have turned to us for help. Many of them never imagined themselves in this position.

I am reminded of one of the mothers who has sought help from a member program. When I met her, the first thing she said to me was "Please don't think I'm a bad mom." A divorced mom, she lives in one of our lovely, and wealthier, shoreline communities. She then explained that she had lost her job when her employer went out of business, had run through her savings and her credit and was facing a daily decision as to whether she would feed her four children breakfast or whether she would feed them dinner. She couldn't do both. Her prior grocery budget had been \$150 a week. Now, in a good month

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with no unanticipated emergency expenses, she had no more than \$150 a month or less than \$40 a week to feed her family of five. So she would wake her children up late to rush out to catch the bus – preferring that they think of her as too disorganized to feed them breakfast rather than having them know they were too poor to have breakfast.

We don't think she was a bad mom. She was just like so many moms and dads in this state, the wealthiest in this country, who face difficult decisions every day. Parents who have to pull their children out of college because tuition payments mean monthly bills can't be paid. Young parents who dilute baby formula so they don't run out. Seniors who skip a dose of their prescription so they can buy some groceries. One out of every seven households can no longer afford to always put dinner on the table.

Connecticut Food Bank is working hard to help those households, those neighbors. If we can provide a week's worth of groceries so they can divert their funds to the oil bill, the gas they need to get to and from work, the prescription they need for their child's earache, then we help relieve some of the financial strain they are experiencing.

But much like the households we serve, Connecticut Food Bank has been struggling to keep up with the changes in the economic and sociopolitical infrastructure. The large scale food industry donations are down and will remain down – in part, because the companies manage inventory and production better, therefore eliminating excess product. Also because the food industry diverts the food once donated to Food Banks to the secondary market – such as the “dollar stores” which have proliferated in this new economy. Government USDA commodities are a declining source of food for us – recently dropping by 45%. USDA commodities were 1/3 of our distribution last year; that is a big hit on our capacity to feed the hungry. For the first time, we are now purchasing food in large quantities to compensate for these decreases in private and public food donations. And just like everyone's household budget, our costs are rising – costs for utilities to keep our warehouses and distribution sites in full operation, for gas to keep our twelve trucks on the road moving food, for the food that we now must purchase.

Whereas I am pleased that the cuts to the Connecticut Nutritional Assistance Program are minimal in this proposed budget, I also want to remind you that a flat budget should not be equated as a success. As you deliberate about – and cut – other human services and other food assistance efforts such as SNAP benefits for documented non-citizens, those individuals who get hurt by the cuts - those moms, dads, seniors, children, veterans - turn to us for help. We, and you, can't food bank our way out of this hunger crisis. We are only a part of the infrastructure that should assure all of us that Connecticut's most vulnerable residents have their very elementary needs met. I ask that you seriously consider the consequences of these difficult decisions on real people, people who need help.

I'll close with a reflection on a young boy at a local food assistance program. About six years old, he came with his mom seeking help. As they walked out of the pantry with two full bags of groceries, that little boy looked up at his mother and said “Mom, we're rich again.”

Connecticut is a wealthy state; let's make every six year old child feel rich again. Protect those services they need to survive and thrive. Thank you.