



U.S. House of Representatives
Congressional Listening Session

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Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex

Statement of Mr. Joe Arthur
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Dear Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Scott, and other members,

Welcome to Harrisburg and thank you for the invitation to share a perspective on how Title IV nutrition programs impact central Pennsylvania farms, food banks and families in need. My name is Joe Arthur, and I am the Executive Director of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank.

The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization incorporated in Pennsylvania that has been serving our region for over 40 years. We are one of 200 partner food banks in Feeding America, the largest hunger-relief organization in the United States. Like our sister food banks across the country, the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank works toward food security solutions that ensure everyone has equitable access to the nourishment they need to lead healthy and productive lives.

We place our neighbors in need at the center of our work and engage those with lived experience in our decision-making. We are mission driven and evidence based in our charitable response to emergency food assistance and in efforts to end hunger for good.

We work for Janet, a hospitality worker who visited a food distribution in rural Adams County for the first time in April 2020. She explained that seeking food assistance was never something she imagined herself doing. She lost her job, had no idea when she would work again, and the bills kept coming. A visit to her local food pantry, while intimidating at first, provided her with enough food for the rest of the month. This allowed her to use her savings for other expenses including rent, car payments, and medicine. As is typical of many food pantry visitors, Janet returned to work, only needing help once or twice to get by.

And for Dolores and her family in suburban Cumberland County, about 20 minutes from where we are today. A former member of the military, Dolores works a full-time job, but it is not enough to cover the expenses for three children, including two with autism. She visited a food pantry for the first time after

her pipes burst and flooded her basement, an unexpected expense that drained her savings and left her with no extra money to purchase food. While her children could participate in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP), she still worried about feeding them on weekends and during the summer. Plus, how would she feed herself? Thankfully, and after much delay in processing the application, she was able to enroll in SNAP to help feed herself and her three children.

Finally, we cannot forget senior citizens. Jerry and other seniors shared their experiences with us during a listening session in Jersey Shore, Pennsylvania. Many older adults, including Jerry, face unique challenges related to their age - fixed incomes, limited mobility, and frequent medical appointments are all common. This puts a strain on daily finances and makes it difficult to thrive. Furthermore, rules about eligibility and income mean Jerry is not eligible for SNAP. With social security and his pension, he makes a bit too much to qualify, but not enough in the face of inflation to have reliable access to healthy food. Jerry's friend is eligible...but only for the minimum benefit of \$20/month. It doesn't go too far these days.

These neighbors are in vastly different circumstances, but their food insecurity stories are similar. People in every community in America need help to make ends meet. They do all that they can to support themselves yet cannot overcome the barriers that stand in the way. People experiencing food insecurity live in rural areas and cities, are old and young, are veterans, adults living alone, single parents, and married households with children. A typical community in central Pennsylvania looks like this:

- Households with children, more than one adult: 32%
- Households without children, more than one adult: 18%
- Households without children, one adult living alone: 14%
- Households with one elderly person living alone: 16%
- Senior two-person households: 9%
- Single parent households with children: 11%

All are our neighbors and fellow citizens and are worthy of support from their community, their neighbors, and their government.

As the debate about the Farm Bill begins, let me go on record with our deepest gratitude to the agriculture community for their commitment to keeping America, and particularly central Pennsylvania, fed.

We can keep up with rising demand for food assistance thanks to our critical partnerships with farmers, producers, retailers, distributors, and government programs. The generosity of the agriculture community allowed us to source, procure, and share nearly 62 million pounds of wholesome, nutritious food last year providing a lifeline for more than 413,000 neighbors in need in central Pennsylvania. We do this through a large, decentralized network of 1,200 partner agencies like food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, VFWs, schools, and senior centers throughout 27 counties, an area twice the size of New Jersey.

Many thanks as well to you, Chairman Thompson, for your leadership. With assistance from you and others in the Pennsylvania delegation, we were able to secure common-sense programmatic waivers that made it easier and safer to serve people during a global pandemic when food insecurity hit its

highest levels in recent history. And it is important to note that over the last 12 months our Food Bank has distributed the second-highest annual amount of food in our history, with only the peak year of the COVID pandemic being higher. In surveys and interviews with people using our services, high inflation and job disruption are by far the most common reasons given for needing food assistance.

The pandemic tested the mettle of all of us; but it most certainly served as a wide scale proving ground for the nation's nutrition assistance programs. The effects of COVID demonstrated how many Americans are one missed paycheck away from not being able to afford basic needs such as food. Overnight, demand for food assistance increased 60%. Children, families, and seniors faced impossible choices between paying for life-saving medicine, keeping the lights on, and food; many for the first time. Unfortunately, one in ten of our neighbors in central Pennsylvania must still make these tough choices. In the deliberations around the Farm Bill, I hope you will consider the lessons we learned from the past three years and expand what worked well, and reform what did not.

Title IV nutrition programs like The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) made millions of pounds of food available just as pressures in the supply chain made it more difficult and expensive to obtain. TEFAP is one of the primary vehicles for delivering USDA food commodities to those in need through the charitable food network.

The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, like most food banks, relies on TEFAP to fill out our inventory with wholesome, nutritious commodities. Last fiscal year, we distributed almost eight million pounds of TEFAP commodities. We encourage Congress to increase the buying power of TEFAP while also considering the cost of storage and distribution. The importance of TEFAP cannot be overstated: in years where TEFAP offerings are low (like 2022), food banks throughout the nation incur financial deficits to acquire enough nutritious food to meet demand.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), called the Senior Food Box Program here in Pennsylvania, provided nutritious food to around 43,000 low-income, older adults (60+) in our service territory; and gave us the supply we needed to partner with DoorDash to deliver the boxes directly to seniors when it wasn't safe for them to leave their homes. We encourage Congress to build upon this innovation and continue to find ways to ease the administrative burden and increase program efficiency.

The Farm to Food Bank program allowed us to leverage the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus Program (PASS) and our own Farm to Agency Resource Market (FARM) Grant program to cover the costs to glean, package, and transport surplus fruits, vegetables, proteins, eggs, dairy, and more for hundreds of Pennsylvania farms. Through these programs, we rescued 365,460 pounds of food that would have otherwise gone to waste and injected nearly \$462,000 back into the central Pennsylvania agriculture economy.

While food banks are important in the fight against hunger, charitable food organizations cannot meet the need alone. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation's first line of defense for food security. In fact, in most years, SNAP provides about 10 times as many meals as the charitable food network. Flexible benefits that allow people to buy the groceries that their families want and need from their hometown retailers and farmers' markets are timely, targeted, and an effective temporary support to help people bridge the gap during tough times.

SNAP also has a net-positive economic impact in that every \$1 invested in SNAP generates approximately \$1.50 of economic activity. Few other government programs can boast that kind of local multiplier. This economic stimulus is even greater in many rural areas where SNAP purchases keep smaller retailers and local farms in business. The food sector of many rural economies in central Pennsylvania in fact rely on it.

We encourage Congress to strengthen and protect SNAP as a financial investment and address barriers that prevent qualified individuals from applying for and receiving benefits. Specifically, SNAP benefits should keep up with the actual cost of food; and they should taper more gradually until participants truly have enough income to support themselves without feeling like they are being pushed off the “benefits cliff.” Eligibility and enrollment guidelines should be updated and streamlined while making the application process more efficient for people in need to access the program versus having to make multiple trips to an agency office.

SNAP also has a role in workforce development. We know that most SNAP participants who can work, do work. For those who find themselves temporarily unemployed, SNAP is one of the few resources available during a job search. The policy that ends food assistance after only three months is complex, error-prone and has not correlated to increased employment. Instead of inflexible penalties that provide a one-size-fits-all approach, Congress should provide adequate funds to improve state employment and training programs, ensure SNAP recipients are offered training opportunities that align with best practices, and remove the time limit on benefits to support participants as they find work.

Many SNAP participants experience other barriers which complicate holding down full-time work, such as transportation, affordable childcare, the completion of educational and technical certifications, and access to employment opportunities that pay a living wage. SNAP is also a support for individuals who are not employed and may be likely to remain unemployed, such as people with disabilities; time limited benefits do not reflect the reality of this lengthy process.

The emergency enhancements and programmatic waivers to existing programs like SNAP, TEFAP and others helped food banks across the nation manage the increased need. The Child Tax Credit, flexible school and summer feeding programs, and pandemic EBT actually lowered levels of food insecurity during the pandemic. These programs provided health and stability when we needed it most, yet the risk of going hungry remains for so many Americans. As a matter of public policy, it is common sense to permanently codify what we’ve learned.

I hope that my testimony today has highlighted the importance of Title IV nutrition programs in the farm bill.

I am proud of the successful public-private partnership that we have created and that we have become a trusted leader in our community on the issue of food insecurity. The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, like other Feeding America food banks, is uniquely capable of working to reduce and eradicate food insecurity. Our innovation in sourcing, delivery, and service seek to respect client dignity and uphold principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging. We hold ourselves accountable to our mission of fighting hunger, improving lives, and strengthening communities.

At a time when uncertainty is high and people continue to turn to food banks and other charitable organizations for the most basic of needs, I encourage Congress to support and advance a strong nutrition title that reflects the reality of the situation we face today. Thank you.