

Testimony of Ruth Riley
Former WNBA Athlete, Olympic Gold Medalist
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Good morning Chairwoman Walorski, Ranking Member McGovern and members of the Committee. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to share my experience on the importance of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or what my family called “food stamps.”

This is an issue that is woven into the fabric of my childhood. My father walked out when I was 4 years old. He left my mom to raise my sister, brother and I on her own. She found herself doing whatever blue collar work she could find to provide for us. It wasn't easy. Besides the rare instances I would wake up in the night to find my mom crying at the kitchen table as she was trying to navigate our family's finances, I was pretty oblivious, as most kids are, to the level of poverty we were living in.

I knew there were some times when my mom paid for our groceries with what looked like monopoly money instead of cash. Off and on throughout my childhood I would have a little ticket that got me a free breakfast or lunch at school. But as a kid, I had limited knowledge of food stamps or free and reduced price school meals. I just knew that, somehow, when we needed it, there was always food.

Because I had this food, I was able to learn and focus in school, which ultimately led me to graduate with honors from the University of Notre Dame. It also fueled my real passion. Basketball. I'm grateful and proud of the success I've had in winning championships at the collegiate, professional, and Olympic levels. I often joke that growing up I was tall, lanky and uncoordinated. Looking back, I can't imagine what my path would have been if I'd been tall, lanky, uncoordinated...and hungry. When times were tough, the nutrition I received through programs like food stamps and school meals helped me grow stronger. It saw me through all the numerous hours of training before and after school, lifting with the football coaches and playing pick-up games with the guys. It was all physically demanding and I could not have done it if I hadn't had enough to eat.

We live in a land of wealth and opportunity, so acknowledging that one in five children in this country lives in a family struggling to put enough food on the table is hard. It's easy to feel compassion about hungry children when it's in the abstract, but it's tough to admit that our next-door neighbor's children might not have the food they need to thrive. I say thrive because, in America, it's often not the case of life or death or survival. It's the fact that kids don't have the nutrition they need to learn and physically grow. By not providing them with that, as a society, we're also not providing them with the opportunity to be successful, to go to college, and to break the cycle of poverty instead of getting stuck in it. We talk about educational reform, but we don't talk about the fact that hungry kids can't concentrate and learn. We talk about health care, but we don't talk about the stunted development and avoidable health issues that rise from a lack of proper nutrition. We talk about jobs, but we overlook the impact that hunger-related issues have on creating a job-ready generation.

SNAP is critical to ending childhood hunger. I can tell you, first hand, that when programs like SNAP work in tandem with other programs like school meals, we can make sure that kids are getting the three meals a day they need to grow up strong. For example, school breakfast ensures that kids can start their days with a healthy meal to fuel their brains, while also allowing parents to stretch SNAP dollars longer into the month instead of running out early. This way, even when money is extremely tight, we can guarantee that kids are still getting the healthy food they need.

My mom taught me to dream big and then to work extremely hard to achieve those dreams. My dream as a little girl growing up on a farm in Indiana was to play in the Olympics, and I was fortunate to see that dream fulfilled in Athens in 2004 as I stood on the podium to receive my gold medal. Today, my dream is equally as bold, and I believe, achievable. I want to see a nation in which no child goes hungry. A nation where every child has the ability to get the nutrition they need to grow up smart and strong. A nation where every little girl dares to dream her dreams, and also gets the food and support she needs to grow up and achieve them.