

Dear Chair Hayes and Committee Members,

My name is Rachel Wilson. I am a 39 year old single mother of three. I grew up in poverty and on government assistance. I grew up barely having enough food. I grew up believing when the power was shut off it was by choice because my mother had convinced my brother and I that we were learning what it was like to live like pilgrims. Well into adulthood I had just assumed this was the way of life. The more aware of real life I became, the more I realized I didn't want that for myself. I never really believed I would do much more than "just make it", but I wanted to. I moved out of my mother's house at the age of 17 with my high school sweetheart and before I knew it, I was a mother at 19 years old and once again on government assistance. The WIC program was a lifeline. At 22 years old I found myself in the position to either stay in an abusive relationship, or be a single mother with no education, and try to support my child. I worked as a waitress, bartender, and even laid tile to provide for my baby. But even in 2004, I had to work two jobs that covered rent, gas, diapers and used WIC and the SNAP program to pay for basic food needs. I quickly became accustomed to the lifestyle I so desperately didn't want to have.

I met my ex-husband and was married with a second child recently born by the middle of 2007. I worked as many shifts as I could between the bar and a fast food restaurant to provide for my family. Most days I worked 10 to 12 hours a day. In order to pay my bills, I had to make too much money to qualify for the SNAP program. I struggled every day of that life. The man I married was an alcoholic that just wouldn't hold a job so providing for the kids rested on my shoulders. I understand that my struggles are a reflection of my choices. However, when you grow up in poverty and what most refer to as "the ghetto", these are normal ways of thinking. Having a drug addict or alcoholic spouse IS the "norm". Having more than one family member in a gang, in prison, or murdered is the norm. Believing that this is as good as it will ever get for you, is the norm. And all of these things were embedded in my mind. In 2010 I left my husband and moved in with my mother. I had decided enough was enough. I didn't want this life for my children. I didn't want them to struggle like I did. I wanted to teach them a new way of life. A new normal. For two years I raised two babies with the help of my mother and step-father. I had always talked about big dreams and going back to school. But it wasn't until then and their encouragement, for the first time, my idea of "making it" was bigger than making management at a fast food restaurant.

In 2011 I enrolled in cosmetology school. I extended my schooling an extra four months so I could leave early to get to work. I missed my children EVERY DAY for 14 months so I could better myself. I went to school Tuesday through Saturday from 8:30am until 2:30pm and went to work as a waitress at a country club from 3pm until 12am. I again enlisted in the help of SNAP to help provide food for my children in my mom's home.

In 2012 I graduated cosmetology school. I had never been more proud of myself. I had actually completed something and was going to be someone. My children and I had moved into our first duplex alone. I was so proud that I didn't just have a job, but I had a career. Yet, I still found myself in the position of having to work two jobs to make it work. I had to work two jobs to keep myself off government assistance. I had to leave my ten year old son home at night with my four year old daughter to go to a job waiting tables after my shift at the salon. I made it work. I made it work at the expense of my son's innocence and childhood and being an absent parent when my children needed me.

In 2013 my grandfather passed away and left me a portion of a life insurance policy. As you can imagine, it was quite difficult to spend the money he had left due to the circumstances I had received it. I held that money for approximately two months trying to decide what to do with it. I decided I was going to make a list of what he would have wanted me to do. I invested in myself and decided to jump into self-employment as a hairdresser. It took me two years of the most mentally and physically exhausting work I had ever done; but I did it. I was going to become everything everyone said I'd never be. I was self-sustaining, and not on any form of assistance. I was living just on the other side of the county line to keep my kids out of "the ghetto", and they were out. They were in good schools and not growing up the way I had. I sheltered them from that lifestyle. I wanted to set the standard of what was an acceptable lifestyle and set new standards for myself.

In 2015 I had my third child. I had to work harder than I ever had before. I found myself alone in a pregnancy not wanting to ask anyone for help. I did it though. I had saved money through the pregnancy for time off and I never did need anyone's help. But it cost my kids seven months of their childhood. After three weeks of having Jack in September of 2015, I went directly back to work to avoid requesting assistance with bills, food and housing. I felt that I had reached the peak of what was available to me in Kansas. I had started noticing the influx in the crime rates and my 15 year old son starting to show interest in being around the same type of people I grew up with. At that point I decided to pack up my kids, everything I could in a 6'X12' trailer and move to Florida. I just wanted a better life for them and myself and there was nothing I wouldn't do for that.

As with any big move there are struggles. The struggles I had included the ability to not only sustain a living situation for myself, but for the kids as well. I obtained a job at a hair salon locally. Because it was an hourly pay, and I had now worked for a corporation, not only was I not making enough money, but I was also being worked hours of the day that my children were home and needed me. They needed my help with homework, cooking dinner, their seven month old infant brother, but mostly they just needed me. Again, I enlisted in the help of the SNAP program. I only needed the assistance for six months before I decided to get back into self-employment to better care for my children.

Up until the COVID shut down, I did not need any assistance from the SNAP program. As a small business owner, when the salon was shut down, I was not eligible for unemployment. I was flat out of a job. My mother gave me a credit card to utilize to pay my bills but I still had to figure out how to make the monthly payment. When I found out that the state of Florida waived work requirements for SNAP, I immediately applied. SNAP was the only way myself and my children were provided food through the shutdown. When it was time for me to requalify after the salon opened back up, even though I was only working at 50% of my normal clientele, I no longer qualified for the same amount. I had hit the benefits cliff and I couldn't understand why. I could barely pay my rent. I realized I was being measured on a scale of my total incoming dollars instead of what I had to pay out to work and buy supplies. I couldn't seem to find my way through the website to find and submit a profit and loss worksheet. I had literally lost all hope and slowly I was losing everything just trying to keep a place of employment and feed my children. I obtained a resource packet from Miss Angela who runs head start at my son's school for VPK. It was there I found an actual phone number to someone who could help me sign up for SNAP. As I hysterically cried to her on the phone that I don't know which way to

turn or how to get help, she asked me to join her at the local library so she could assist me in being accepted into the SNAP program.

The aftermath of COVID is much worse than the COVID shutdown itself. People have either decided that getting their hair done just isn't a necessity, or they're still scared to get out in public. I still work on about 50% of my original clientele. I barely pay my bills and am standing on a prayer when it comes to my rent and the COVID restrictions keeping me from being evicted. I don't CHOOSE to be on SNAP. I never have. I request help from the program when there's nowhere else to turn. Throughout my life, SNAP has been the only reason myself or my children have had the ability to eat like normal human beings should. We are not lesser of people because we need help. We don't want to reside in a state of poverty. Sometimes life just happens and more often than not it's happening to people who are trying to break the cycle of poverty. We are trying to set a new standard for ourselves, and our children. There is no amount of pride not worth giving up if that means our children do better than we did. SNAP is such an important program to make sure no one goes hungry whether it's due to sudden loss of employment or being a product of environment and not knowing any other way. With the resources supplied by the government, I believe we can get better. We can do better. But we need help. As a whole, with help from programs like SNAP and parents who just want better for their children, we can push for a "better" next generation. But we can't make that change alone.

Thank you,

Rachel Wilson