

Written testimony of Tega Toney
House Oversight and Reform Committee
Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy
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Chairman Krishnamoorthi, Ranking Member Cloud and members of the subcommittee, thank you for giving me this opportunity to share the potential impact of cutting safety-net benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and how such cuts put our children at risk.

My name is Tega Toney, and I am a social studies teacher at Oak Hill High School in Oak Hill, W.Va., where I also attended high school. We are situated in the southern portion of the state, which is struggling due to declining coal revenues and an opioid epidemic that has rocked our community to the core. The majority of my students come from households struggling to make ends meet. Many of my students are the primary caregivers of their younger siblings for various reasons—often it is because a parent is working three jobs to survive; but in other instances, it is due to the crisis of opioid addiction that plagues many families. I have students who are homeless. I have students who have lost parents to an overdose. I have students who are working evening jobs, not to have spending money for frivolous desires, but to contribute financially to their families. For these reasons and so many more, it is disheartening and gut-wrenching to see a proposal to cut SNAP benefits that will make the mountain these children and families must climb a little taller and a little steeper.

The proposal will restrict a bipartisan provision called “broad-based categorical eligibility,” which allows commonsense flexibility on SNAP limits on income and assets. This proposed change will cut off SNAP benefits for approximately 3 million Americans. The Department of Agriculture’s data shows that nearly 12 percent of households are already food insecure, and this change will increase that percentage. The department also acknowledged that it will have the greatest impact on working families and on households with seniors and people with disabilities. The department also estimates that approximately 7.4 percent of households with children would lose SNAP benefits under this proposal. In addition to the children harmed by losing SNAP benefits, approximately 1 million children will lose access to their free or reduced-priced school meals.

Food insecurity is a real and tangible threat to my students and their well-being. Every day, I see the impact hunger can have on a student. Academically, students are unable to focus and become inattentive, causing them to miss important and vital information in class. This has a cascading effect, because the more information students miss in class, the further behind they fall. Eventually, it can lead to a host of academic and behavioral issues.

Food insecurity also affects students and families emotionally. When parents are struggling to put food on the table, many may feel a sense of worthlessness. Children can sense this—especially high school students like mine. As educators, we see children bring these issues into the classroom with them. They also carry the emotional burdens they experience coming from

a food-insecure home. I have witnessed this in my students in many ways, ranging from mood swings and irritability to emotional outbursts and beyond. This is a real issue that needs to be considered when the funds that provide access to food and nutrition are being cut.

The physical effects of food insecurity have been well-documented. Proper nourishment is essential to a well-functioning body. Children who are food insecure are often fatigued, weak and have low energy levels. Their immune systems have a difficult time fighting off germs and viruses that the children are exposed to in a school setting. Many times, this leads to doctor visits and hospitalizations. For a family that is struggling financially or unable to have food at home, a visit to the doctor may also be delayed, which leads to even more lost school time. These events could have been avoided if access to healthy food and a proper diet were easily available.

It is difficult for people who have never experienced food insecurity to realize the devastating impact it has on families, communities and children. It permeates every aspect of every day to those who battle with it. That is why this proposal is so egregious. Unnecessarily putting our nation's children at risk for food insecurity and the complications that accompany it is playing recklessly with children's physical, emotional and academic well-being. As a nation, as a society, and as fellow human beings—we are better than this.

One claim among supporters of this proposal is that there are instances of fraud within the SNAP program. That, however, is the exception and not the rule. SNAP has some of the most rigorous program integrity standards. The Department of Agriculture found that SNAP fraud is relatively rare. As a public school teacher, I do not punish the whole class for one student's infraction. Therefore, based on the actions of one individual, our government should not punish those who truly need food assistance or any assistance.

Many of the people who qualify for SNAP contribute to their communities and are trying to make ends meet. In many instances, they are proud people who are internally struggling to even accept help. We should never demonize them or make them feel inadequate.

My real fear and concern is that if this proposal comes to fruition, many of my students—along with thousands of students in West Virginia—will lose access to food at home and at school. It is estimated that 1 million students nationwide will be impacted if this proposal is not withdrawn. While it is true that some of those students will still qualify for free and reduced-price meals, it will require their parents or legal guardians to submit paperwork. This is a purposefully unnecessary barrier. There are countless instances when parents cannot complete the paperwork required to determine eligibility for free and reduced-price school meals. Just in my community, I can tell you that this could be due to pride, shame or incapacitation as a result of addiction.

Almost a decade ago, my school district recognized the great need to combat the food insecurity that was plaguing our students. We included a universal feeding program in our excess levy, so that all students, no matter their socioeconomic status, receive free breakfast

and lunch. This is a combined effort of the federal government, our school district and our taxpayers to care for our most vulnerable population: our children. Every school in our district qualifies under the community eligibility provision, meaning 60 percent or more of our students qualify for free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch. We receive federal money to cover the initial cost of feeding those students from low socioeconomic households, and the money from the excess levy covers the rest of the cost so that every student in our district receives free breakfast and lunch. The levy is up for a vote every five years and has always passed with more than a 70 percent vote. The message our district sends is clear: We care about our kids and their need for proper nutrition. Further, the universal feeding program removes the stigma that is attached to kids in need who qualify for free or reduced-price meals. This helps put all kids on an equal and level playing field, while also taking care of socialization issues that would potentially arise from being able to easily identify which kids are receiving these meals.

While I tout our universal feeding program, and am very proud of our taxpayers and our district for making the basic need of student access to food a priority, it does raise an important question: Is it fair to expect a school district to shoulder a responsibility of this magnitude? If this proposal is enacted, many school districts would not be able to develop and implement creative solutions such as the one my district has developed. So are we going to expect teachers, school cooks, custodians and secretaries to begin carrying this responsibility? School employees already carry our students' emotional baggage home with us. In many instances, school employees try to meet the basic needs of our students while also caring for our own families. We love and care for kids. That is why we are in the business we are in. But is it fair to expect us to shoulder this burden, too?

In southern West Virginia, our families, students, schools and communities are hurting. Unfortunately, our situation is not unique. The issues we face can also be found in cities, towns and rural communities across the nation. This proposal will do much harm and provide no help to the families that need it the most. The families' struggle will be compounded, and kids will suffer. We can, and must, do better.