



The Future of SNAP: Moving Past the Pandemic

Testimony of Odessa Davis, on behalf of Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry Campaign, Before the House Committee on Agriculture, Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations

Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and Members of the Committee, thank you for convening this important conversation and for providing me with the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Odessa Davis and I am a mom, a college student, special education para-educator and hunger advocate with Share Our Strength and the Manna Food Center in Montgomery County, Maryland.

I am so glad this hearing is focused on the challenges women face in trying to make ends meet and put food on the table for their families. As you work to improve access to important nutrition programs like SNAP and school meals, I'd like to share my story to help you understand how important the investments you make in these vital programs are to improving the lives of families like mine in every community around the country.

I have always believed in the importance of working hard to achieve your dreams. After high school, I graduated from Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Miami. I then returned to Maryland with my son to pursue a degree in Business Management at Montgomery College. With help from scholarships and a supportive family and friend network, I recently earned my Associates Degree, graduating with honors! This fall, I will be starting at the UMD Global Campus.

To make ends meet during school, I worked as many as four jobs, including as a special education para-educator with Montgomery County Public Schools. But even before the pandemic, it was hard to make ends meet. My job with the school system only pays when school is in session, meaning there is no income during the summer months, over winter and spring breaks, or on other days when the schools are closed. So, I was also working as a contractor for the school's sports league and at a summer job with Montgomery County Recreation Therapeutics – both of which were eliminated due to COVID-19.

Prior to the pandemic, my son and I were financially limited, and, even watching every penny, there never seemed to be enough to go around. There were so many months when I had to make tough choices. How was I going to buy enough food and pay the

light bill? Put gas in the car or get groceries? These are the questions that face so many families like mine and the financial strain got even tighter once COVID hit.

These challenges and difficult decisions don't just affect me, I also have my 11-year old son to think about. Many of you here today are parents, so you understand that, as a mom, I want to build a strong, healthy and successful life for him. I want him to get the food he needs - every single day - so he can focus and learn, so he can stay healthy and happy.

Programs like SNAP and school meals made it possible for me to keep food on the table. But we need to make sure these programs work together and work effectively. **Strengthening all of the federal nutrition programs is essential because they work together to reach families with kids of all ages where they live and learn.**

Before the pandemic, my son participated in the free and reduced-price meal program at school, which was a huge relief - knowing he was getting the nutrition he needed to focus and learn. For a while, we were also receiving support from SNAP each month, but we lost those benefits once my earnings increased just over the threshold for the two of us. Once you factor in rent, the electric bill, gas for the car, water bill, and all the things that seem to pop up like medicine, car repairs, replacing a pair of shoes my son grew out of, there just isn't much left for food.

Then the pandemic hit and times got really tough for us. My jobs with school sports and the Parks & Rec department were canceled due to new safety measures. It then took me nearly a year to get unemployment benefits –our state's unemployment system is outdated and makes it more complicated to show income loss with multiple low-wage jobs.

And not only did I lose income, when schools closed, my son also lost access to the school meals that had been such a vital source of nutrition during the school year. While his school still offered meals, they were only distributed in the middle of the day, while he was in virtual school. I tried to pick them up when I could, but our schedules made it really hard to ensure that he was those nutritious meals on a consistent basis.

When Pandemic EBT rolled out, it was a life saver. This benefit put \$5 a day onto a grocery benefit card so I could buy more of the food my son needed, when he needed it. P-EBT really helped me put food on the table during the height of the pandemic, but, when that benefit ended in November, things got really hard. I ran through the small savings that I had worked so hard to build, and we, like so many other Americans, relied on food pantries to make sure we had enough to eat.

The increased struggle to make ends meet and provide for our small family due to COVID-19 is not unique, nor are the challenges that we faced before the pandemic. I am talking to you today, but I know dozens of women, just like me, who have their own stories to tell. Parents who are working multiple jobs, pursuing an education and raising families, all while under extreme financial strain. We are stretching every penny to provide for their families, but can use some help to make it through.

That is why programs like school meals and SNAP are so important. Knowing that our kids are getting the food they need, allows us to focus on climbing out of these hard times and, once we do, we can give a hand to others.

When I was at Montgomery College, I started a club called "Back on Track." It was a small group of adult students who were facing similar financial challenges. We worked hard to support one another and to help each other navigate the programs that could help. This year, 50% of our group was successful in graduating.

Today, along with my job with the school system, I'm working for the Community Action Agency and using my culinary skills as a volunteer chef, preparing food for people who are also facing tough times.

Thank you for allowing me to meet with you today and I hope my story helps you to better understand the importance of nutrition programs in the everyday lives of families across the country. I am grateful for our time together.