

Testimony for “The Future of SNAP: Moving Past the Pandemic”
Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations

May 24, 2021

Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon and the Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for receiving my written testimony today regarding the SNAP program.

About 25 years ago, I was impacted significantly while serving at a homeless mission in Ft. Worth, Texas. I felt like my heart literally broke as I engaged men, women and children living on the streets. Not long after that, I met my beautiful bride and we married in the chapel of that same mission, the homeless as our witnesses. Three months later we opened the doors to our own compassion-driven ministry called Watered Gardens in our SW Missouri community of Joplin.

After the first year of operation, we made the difficult decision of reducing my full-time work as a physical therapist to part-time. This was a sacrifice for us and our five children, but it was evident the ministry needed more of my attention. My wife and I worked hard to build a team of compassionate volunteers and for the next nine years it remained completely volunteer driven with no payroll at all.

But the sacrifice paid off.

The ministry is now the largest privately funded poverty-fighting organization in our four-state area. Today, we serve both the poor and the homeless, offering 105 beds in three facilities serving those in long term recovery, adult men and women in need of emergency shelter, homeless moms with children and we have a respite unit for those discharged from the hospital who have nowhere to go to finish their recovery. Our non-homeless services include workforce development, education, and meeting basic needs like furniture, appliances, clothing and food. We served more than 60,000 meals last year and from our Mission Market we helped nearly 400 families with more than 57,000 pounds of food for their homes through private donations. I say, “We helped them,” but really, they helped themselves through a unique ministry we operate called the Worth Shop. We call it a Worth Shop because we have found that work awakens worth in people’s lives. It is a place where people can trade their time to earn everything from clothing and shelter to furniture or food. Work is dignifying whether it’s through helping in the recycling section of our Worth Shop or staining and sewing together beautiful leather journals.

Just last week I sat across from Hope in our Worth Shop, a young woman who was earning her food. I asked her, “Hope, why do you earn your food here instead of going to get it for free from somewhere else.”

“I like it this way,” she said. “I feel better about myself.”

I’ve heard countless comments like that over the years. One man said, “You take the shame out of the game.” Another person said, “It’s like we get to keep our dignity.” One lady named Beth who was earning her food by knitting stocking caps for newborns in the local hospital called me later and left a voice message that said, “Thank you for treating me as equal.”

These are more than just anecdotal stories. Research also bears this out. The American Journal of Applied Psychology published a paper in 2015 “Personality Change Following Unemployment,” a study of 6000 unemployed, subsidized adults.¹ They discovered the longer people are without work, the more they suffer. Specifically, there was statistically significant decline in three of five psychosocial metrics: agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness. In other words, people become disheartened and grumpy when they’re not working.

So, if we want to help energize people to get back in the workforce, then we should couple our charity with an expectation to be productive – they’ll feel better about themselves as dignity is restored.

We do this at our mission every day, viewing people who many call poor and needy as people who also have great potential, capacity and ability.

April was one of those people. When she first stepped into the doors of our mission, she was homeless, addicted and had lost her children. She was on SNAP and had been in and out of HUD housing, but it was at the mission surrounded by people who cared for her – willing to develop a relationship with her - that she found the courage to get clean, get a job and turn in her SNAP card. She said that was the one of the scariest things she ever did because she simply had never known that she had the ability to provide for herself. But with a compassionate support-team who esteemed her as able, she did it. Not only that, but she got her kids back, went back to school and ended up working as our office manager before opening and leading her own recovery ministry where *she* now inspires women to discover their God-given potential.

I’ll never forget Mike, a middle-aged man who has a 3rd grade education, riding his bicycle down to the mission after seeing one of our public service announcements. When I greeted him, he said, “I saw you on the TV say that the working poor are happier than the welfare poor, so I went and got a job!” He was so excited. When I asked him what he needed that day, he said he wanted to earn his food at the mission instead of using his SNAP card. That was seven years ago and Mike still has that same job and loves it.

I have many more first-hand stories of people finding freedom from dependency simply because we viewed them as unique individuals with unique gifts rather than charity cases intended to be stuck on the receiving end of someone’s benevolence.

Unfortunately, I have no shortage of stories that go in a different direction. For us and others who operate work-oriented missions like ours, SNAP benefits are often more hurtful than helpful. Kenny, horribly addicted to alcohol, would stand on the median with a cardboard sign that read “Food Stamps ½ price.” I have recorded testimonies of others who have openly shared with me how easy and common it is to liquidate these benefits at fifty cents on the dollar.

Last week, I met with Kevin an able-bodied homeless man at our mission. He earns his bed and meals like everyone else because he can, but when I asked him about employment, he said, “No way. I can only work for cash under the table. I’m waiting on my disability.” That conversation led to SNAP. He pulled his card out and leaned across the table, “James,” he said. “They put hundreds of dollars on my card last month. I don’t even know what I’m going to do with it. I think I’m going to go buy some bulk food and give it away.” Unfortunately, I learned over the weekend that Kevin failed his drug test. He’s back out on the streets.

The right kind of help – rehabilitation and development – are available for guys like Kevin and Kenny but for them and countless others, means-tested welfare programs disincentivize work that would otherwise lead to a flourishing life.

In fact, before SNAP work requirements were waived in my state in 2016, more than 43,000 able-bodied adults were on the program not working at all. But by the end of the year, after the waiver for SNAP work requirements had been removed, that number had dropped by 85%.²

I remember that - before the new law went into effect. There was a lot of talk in the news about how people might go hungry. But when it passed, no one went hungry. Why? Because on average, there was a 70% increase in earnings by those able-bodied adults on the program and the rest of it was taken up by private sector charity.

We should never underestimate the incredible potential of civil society's response in times of need. Just this last Saturday, we recognized the 10th anniversary of an incredible disaster in my community. On May 22 of 2011 one of the most historically devastating F5 tornadoes tore through the center of our city rendering more than 7000 people homeless in an hour and killing 161. It wasn't federal government relief that saved us. Caring neighbors, compassionate citizens and local leaders were involved in rescue, relief and then organized a coordinated response long before government help showed up.

James Madison, debating on the floor of the House in 1794, asserted, "Charity is no part of the legislative duty of the government." After twenty-one years of fighting poverty, that makes sense to me. The government doesn't know Kevin, Kenny, Mike, April, Beth or Hope. I know them. And without a personal knowledge of each individual and what's really going on in their lives, needs cannot be met in a way that does not tend toward trapping people in dependency and stripping them of dignity.

Charity has never been administered well from the government. FDR himself admitted this in his 1935 State of the Union Address. After comparing dependency on relief as a narcotic – "a subtle destroyer of the human spirit," he went on to promise, "The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief." That was sound conviction because although the government might be able to feed people, it can never give those struggling in poverty what justice demands – dignity and friendship. That comes by way of compassionate neighbors like the ones who volunteer at our mission who also develop vital relationships with those who come for food.

I implore this committee to consider what it can do to safeguard the future of those vital relationships that are certainly undermined or crowded out when food simply comes on a card with nothing required.

James Whitford
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Watered Gardens Ministries

¹<https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/apl-a0038647.pdf>

²<https://thefga.org/paper/missouri-food-stamp-work-requirements/>



Raw interview with Dennis and his SNAP experience
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcOizE7xWVo>



Kenny's cardboard sign