

Testimony of Diane Sullivan

Before the

U.S. House Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy

“A Threat to America’s Children:  
The Trump Administration’s Proposed Changes to Categorical Eligibility in the  
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)”

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Chairman Krishnamoorthi, Ranking Member Cloud, and members of this esteemed committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before you. I am the mother of six children, now teens and young adults, from Medford, Massachusetts who has experienced hunger and homelessness for a year with my children. I routinely hold multiple part-time jobs that include both contract work that compensates me a fair hourly wage and employment where my hourly wage has generally hovered just over minimum wage.

I am also one of the 3.1 million Americans who will lose SNAP benefits if the Administration’s proposal to limit individual states’ ability to apply categorical eligibility is implemented. In addition to my personal connection to this ill-informed policy proposal, I serve as a consultant with both non-profit organizations and agriculture groups working to ensure that everyone, regardless of income, has consistent access to safe, affordable, and nutritious food choices.

It is both my personal and professional experiences that uniquely qualify me to speak as an expert on this matter. I appreciate this subcommittee for acknowledging me as such. Currently I co-lead the Boston site of Witnesses to Hunger, contract with the Income and Work Supports team of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), serve as member of the Steering Committee of the Boston Food Access Council, and this month will begin my work on the Alliance to End Hunger’s Hunger Free Communities Network Advisory Council.

My goal is to create the first of more meaningful seats at the table for those of us adversely impacted by the policies and regulations that make our food less accessible or more expensive. Too often, food policy debate in this country exclusively takes place among those in power—elected officials, scholars, researchers, both for profit and non-profit special interest groups, and more.

Rarely are those of us with lived experience in hunger invited to the table when the policies that directly impact our lives are discussed, designed, and implemented. This is increasingly the case as retailers, policy makers, state ballot initiatives, and more press to regulate farmers in such a way that eliminates affordable, safe and nutritious food choices and drives up the cost of our food. These efforts devalue the limited purchasing power of the SNAP dollar, all while the program itself is under attack.

We are the real people who would fall victim to the Administration's plan to limit the use of categorical eligibility in SNAP that allows states like mine, when determining applicants' eligibility, to consider the real barriers we face in accessing food, like the local economic conditions of high rental markets and costly childcare expenses. I live in Massachusetts; a state that ranks third most expensive for housing, second most expensive for childcare, among the highest in energy costs; and we are the number one most expensive in terms of our food.

Further, limiting SNAP recipients' ability to modestly save for the tools that enhance our ability to escape the grips of poverty, like education or the purchase of a vehicle, is contrary to its function as an instrument to move people toward economic stability. When analyzed through a racial justice lens, as noted by CLASP's Parker Gilkesson and Darrel Thompson, the Administration's proposed rule "builds on generational harm that government policies have inflicted on people of color, who have been historically denied the opportunity to build wealth."

These are the precise reasons why my state and 42 others have applied broadened categorical eligibility when determining who among their residents is eligible for SNAP benefits. It's important to note that while my family would become ineligible under this new rule because our combined household income is a mere \$124/month over 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), my income after deductions would still meet the standard per the federal regulations and guidelines that ultimately determine eligibility. But because our gross household income is 135% FPL, my family simply wouldn't be considered at all. We wouldn't even get through the front door.

Let me walk us through this math.

I live with four of my children, two high school students and two recent high school graduates. Because my two daughters are 19 and 20 years old, income from their part-time jobs is considered in addition to mine when determining SNAP eligibility and benefit level. While our household income often fluctuates as my contract work ebbs and flows, and I can sometimes supplement with part-time employment, this is a real time snapshot of our current situation.

As a family of 5, our combined, gross household income is \$3,393 per month. The 130% of FPL federal cutoff for the gross income test for a family of 5 is \$3,269. Because Massachusetts allows for broadened categorical eligibility of incomes up to 200% FPL, state administrators will then consider certain deductions to adjust for net income and apply the second, federal income after deductions test to ultimately determine whether an applicant qualifies or not.

Let's be clear: having an income up to 200% FPL does not automatically qualify my, or any other, household for SNAP. Applying categorical eligibility simply gets us through the door, so the state can conduct further screenings for any appropriate deductions. Because I wasn't turned away for being slightly over 130% FPL, administrators were then able to consider my standard, housing and work-related expenses to determine that my family currently qualifies for \$187 in monthly SNAP benefits.

Now, let me explain what it took for me to get here.

Despite what the Administration would like for everyone to believe, I didn't just wander into some office pretending to be in need and leave with a brochure and SNAP benefits. That's not at all how this works. Last fall, my family was receiving a modest amount of SNAP benefits while I was working for near minimum wage at a local market and ramping up to begin work on a new contract. Upon entering into this contract, I left my job at the market to focus on this new work that pays a much higher hourly rate and, with the flexibility that comes with working from home, was able to help care for my mother whose health was rapidly declining.

While my income had increased, I wasn't certain if it had risen to the level of ineligibility for SNAP. Using my gross income after business expenses, and the income of my children, after months of bureaucratic confusion, my family was eventually approved for \$187 in monthly SNAP benefits, equating to 42 cents per person per meal. Though this may not seem like a lot of money to most, it represents a significant portion of my very tight, monthly food budget.

Indeed, after my monthly bills have been paid—or otherwise negotiated—and my SNAP benefits have run out, I still struggle sometimes to access affordable, nutritious food for my family. I don't need to imagine what this new loss of benefits will mean to my family; I lived that reality through the end of last year. Normally, I stock a 2-tiered fruit bowl on my kitchen table that my children go to for quick, healthy snacks. That bowl so often remained empty. I was stretching the meat and vegetables intended for one meal into two. Unable to buy in bulk, I was spending more per ounce on everything and shopping more items in the middle aisles of the grocery store rather

than the perimeters where the more expensive fresh proteins, produce and dairy that my growing, teen-aged boys should be eating exist.

Additionally, my family's SNAP eligibility automatically grants access to free school breakfast and lunch for my two sons, both high school students. If this proposal is implemented, not only will we lose \$187 in direct SNAP assistance, we would have to apply for free or reduced access to school meals. I'm not sure where we'd land based on our income, but even if my sons were found eligible for reduced rate meals at school, this amounts to \$252 in an additional annual cost for me, with no increase to my already overwhelmed budget.

My children, like all students, require nutritious food to keep them healthy and ready to learn. Research and personal experience consistently show when children eat healthy food, they are less likely to report headaches, stomach aches, and difficulty concentrating. It's no wonder that a well-nourished student is more likely to meet their highest educational potential. Adding to this hardship, without SNAP my family would lose access to the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) that makes fresh produce at local farmers' markets more affordable and accessible. To that end, this proposal harms local farmers and economies by eliminating a reliable income stream for small businesses, just as it rips food from the mouths of people in need.

My budget is simply not capable of absorbing the cost of the loss of SNAP and the benefits it triggers, including a small discount on my utility bill. \$187 in SNAP benefits certainly does not feed my family for a month, but it eases the burden of competing interests in my budget. With that loss and more, what then shall we do? Make more frequent visits to the local food pantry? Already, food pantries across the country are struggling to keep up with demand. Cutting access to the SNAP program to more than 3 million people with this rule alone—100,000 of us in Massachusetts—will only exacerbate that problem.

Now a constant juggling act, shall I continue to adjust by dipping into my electric bill to put food on the table, then stealing from the rent to pay my electric bill, and so on? Shall I revert to the days when I would casually pass up an opportunity to eat today, so that my children have a better chance of eating tomorrow? Already, I'm struggling to recover from those months last year when we weren't receiving SNAP. And you know the saying, "When it rains, it pours," right?

Of course, it did. During the time last year when we were without SNAP, my usually reliable 2004 Mercury Sable broke down. Estimates for the required repairs ranged between \$800-1,000. Fortunately, I was able to have it serviced at the automotive shop in our local vocational high school, where my son is a student, for about half that cost.

Then, on my way to visit my Mom shortly after a snowstorm, my windshield was cracked by a flying rock. Cost of repair: \$250. Because this 16-year old vehicle that was gifted to my family 5 years ago isn't worth much on paper, I initially thought I might not try to save the money to invest in its repair.

Then I thought about its true worth – its contribution to my family's quality of life by getting us to and from work and appointments; my children to and from their school and sports activities; and me to the grocery store, allowing me to shop sales and in bulk. It's important to note that if this rule is implemented, my car valued just over the federal asset test for SNAP, would also render my family ineligible for benefits. It's a great car for which I'm grateful. But we can't eat it.

As you might imagine, with all the challenges we faced at the time, the 2019 holiday season passed rather quietly in our home. There was no budget for the gifts I had hoped to purchase for my children. There wasn't much to show for our annual Christmas dinner, as the usual spread of main and side dishes, treats and desserts was limited to a one-pot meal. Thankfully, my children are amazingly resilient and know how hard I've worked to provide for them. They get it.

My children also understand that we are hardly alone in this struggle. 68% of SNAP recipients reside in households with children. If this proposal is implemented, 684,000 of those households with children will lose all SNAP benefits, causing nearly 982,000 students to lose certification for free school meals. My children know that while our story is uniquely our own, it is only one of millions. These realities exist everywhere in America and too often go untold.

I rise and share my testimony in defense of my own family and to give voice to those who have yet to find their way to the tables where these discussions are taking place. My experience consistently shows me that hunger is not a Democrat or Republican issue. It is not an urban or rural one. Hunger exists in every pocket of every single county across this country. As Congressman Jim McGovern from my home state often reminds us, "Hunger is a political condition."

I've learned that in this process if you're not at the table, it's likely you're on the menu. As today's 'daily special,' I appreciate and am honored to have received an invitation to be heard on this matter. I share this personal testimony so freely because nobody else—even with the best of intentions—can do it for me. My story is my truth and has shaped me as the advocate and employee that I am today. Through my contract and volunteer work, I provide guidance on ways to meaningfully engage people with lived experience in our collective goal to ensure that nobody in this country goes

hungry. In part, I do this by sharing my personal experience in the context of these policies.

I seek to help others, on both sides of the aisle, better understand what their preferred food policies look and feel like to those of us impacted by them. I hope that my presence allows people to navigate and overcome the biases they once held about me and people like me. In addition to my work with social justice organizations, I've spoken at agriculture events in places like Missouri, Iowa, Georgia and Louisiana. In 2018, I joined more than 600 FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America) members on the grounds of the Missouri State Fair where we packaged 100,000 meals to be distributed to food banks across the state.

A month earlier in rural Indiana, I stood alongside junior board members of Team Purebred, a national group of young leaders in agriculture, distributing food to families, elders, and veterans in need. As we gathered to reflect on our experience together, it was evident that these amazingly, thoughtful, and gracious young adults better understood that as much as the suffering of hunger crosses perceived party lines, so do the solutions.

My experience has taught me that productive farmers and ranchers in this country are perhaps among the best friends low-income people could have. They provide us the broadest choices of safe and affordable food options in the world, so long as they are permitted to do so. As low income consumers, we remain stuck in the middle of policies that increase the cost of our food, just as the critical safety net of programs like SNAP is eroded. Still, I am not discouraged.

It seems that regardless of where I go or to whom I speak, we can all rally around one important concept – that no child deserves to go hungry. We can also agree that in the hierarchy of human needs, perhaps none is more essential than access to safe, affordable, and nutritious food. Adequate nutrition provides the foundation for the healthy bodies and minds of both children and adults to reach their fullest potential. In a nation of agricultural abundance, where so many are able to shop without even looking at or considering food prices, it is almost inconceivable that anyone struggles to put food on the table.

Yet, more than 36 million of us do, as demonstrated by our need to access SNAP, the United States' first line of defense against hunger, to help feed our families. I share my story so publicly never because it's easy. I know how I will be judged by some. I share my testimony because when anyone seeks to make food less accessible to those of us struggling to survive, they should know who they are hurting.

If we are inclined to address food insecurity and hunger in this country, we must engage more experts like me with lived experience in it. In such economic prosperity, the least of our priorities should be taking food from the plates of those for whom this alleged abundance remains unattainable. This is what Congress voted on and the President agreed to in the historically bipartisan passage of the 2018 Farm Bill.

I urge the Administration to listen to the voices of those of us who would be harmed and to reconsider its proposal to eliminate individual states' ability to apply categorical eligibility to address the real and urgent needs of their residents. I encourage this subcommittee, both Democrat and Republican members alike, to set aside party politics and rhetoric; rally your colleagues in Congress; and send a unified message to the Administration.

Tell them you met a woman who made her way here from Boston to take back the narrative about her. Please do not allow the Administration to hide behind an unfounded, biased perception about who we are as people, or who I am as a hard-working woman, mother, grandmother, and valued member of my community. Together, we can and we must work toward identifying and implementing real solutions to hunger in America.

Thank you for your consideration.