



**Testimony of Heather Reynolds, Managing Director
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**United States House of Representatives Committee on Rules
*Ending Hunger in America: Challenges, Opportunities,
and Building the Political Will to Succeed***

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Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and members of the Committee, thank you for your time today. My name is Heather Reynolds and I have the privilege of serving as Managing Director of the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities, or LEO. LEO is a research lab at the University of Notre Dame that helps service providers apply scientific evaluation methods to better understand and share effective poverty interventions. Prior to coming to Notre Dame, I spent almost two decades at Catholic Charities Fort Worth (CCFW), the last 13 years as its CEO. My time at LEO and at CCFW have both shaped my insights on the audacious goal of ending hunger in our country.

A wise man once said, "We have the food, the ability, and the means to end hunger in America—what we lack is the political will and moral courage to act. We must change that." Thank you, Chairman McGovern, for this source of inspiration. I have three points on how we can achieve your vision.

First, ending hunger begins with the safety net, but it does not stop there. The safety net plays a key role in combating hunger. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, ensures people—most notably children—are not hungry today. Nationally, more than 66% of SNAP participants are families with children. While SNAP provides a modest benefit, an average of \$1.39 per person per meal, it is an essential basic needs assistance

program and part of a critical foundation for health and well-being for vulnerable Americans.

The social safety net lessens the impact of poverty on families in difficult situations. Unfortunately, these programs mainly treat the symptoms of poverty and not their root causes. The causes of poverty vary considerably across people—lack of skill, a mental illness, the absence of a parent in the household, a physical disability. Unfortunately, the social safety net cannot alter these underlying conditions. Rather, it can only help provide what poverty is preventing—health insurance, three hot meals a day, a roof over their family’s head.

A coordinated effort to eradicate hunger must then include programs whose larger goals are to move families permanently out of poverty. These programs work hand-in-hand with the social safety net and can only be successful when the safety net is strong and effective.

We see the importance of the safety net daily. Across the country, social service providers and local governments are implementing innovative programs aimed at overcoming barriers and generating upward mobility. These programs, with economic stability as the goal, work in the context of broader safety net programs such as SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and housing vouchers. LEO is running several studies—in Texas, Indiana, and South Dakota—aimed at getting students with low incomes credentialed and degreed to support a goal of increased earnings. Our evidence shows promising results, but also shows that service providers must balance the short-term needs of clients with the long-term goal of financial stability. People cannot work on their education if they worry their children will not have food on the table today. The safety net is needed in our country, but its role is to ensure people are not hungry today. Tomorrow’s hunger needs to be solved differently.

Which brings me to my second point. To achieve an end to hunger, we need comprehensive, family-centered solutions to poverty. We need a comprehensive approach that provides not just food, not just housing, not just job training, but also the human support and interactions that help drive changes and choices in the face of despair.

These solutions need to be family-centered, individualized, and comprehensive. Simple declarations, such as getting people employed, fall short. We need to look no further than the SNAP program to see this. As of 2018, 79% of all families receiving SNAP have at least one person working, and one-third of these families have two or three people working (Census.gov). I found this to be true from my experience as a provider, where we served over 100,000 people a year. More than 70% of our clients had a full-time job, yet they were still walking through our doors needing assistance.

The Padua program, operated by Catholic Charities Fort Worth and studied by us at LEO, is designed to see all the complexity that poverty brings, and address each element through supportive case management. This holistic approach begins with an individualized assessment and case plan, engagement in the social safety net as a first step, small caseloads for staff, case managers serving as both connectors and coaches, and the ability to serve clients for the long haul. Padua is designed to support participants to reduce dependency on government benefits, earn a living wage appropriate to their family size, accumulate emergency savings, and reduce bad debt.

Participants saw a 25% increase in full-time employment. Padua was particularly successful for those who were not already employed at enrollment, with a 67% increase in the probability of working full-time and a 46% increase in monthly earnings. Receiving support from Padua also improved participants' health conditions by 53%. The program had a significant effect on those who were deemed most vulnerable when CCFW first encountered them. Padua participants who lacked stable housing when they entered the program saw a 64% increase in housing stability. This program demonstrates that weaving the social safety net with holistic, individualized programming for those who need it can have the greatest impact. To achieve an end to hunger, a more comprehensive solution to poverty, like Padua, is needed.

Why do I believe solutions like Padua are what our country needs? Because not only do I see the clients, know their stories, and believe in the approach, but I have evidence to back this up. Which brings me to my final point. Ending hunger will not happen through hunches, assumptions, and good intentions. Ending hunger will happen with evidence-based programs and policies.

LEO evaluated the Excel Center program in Indianapolis. This program, founded by Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana, works with adults to help them complete their high school degree. It does so with holistic support, by accommodating students' work schedules, providing childcare, and helping them navigate challenges along the path to completion. LEO's research shows that the Excel Center leads to significantly higher earnings and a move from the service sector to health and education sector jobs. Excel Center graduates have higher earnings than adults who instead complete the more typical GED. Programs like these work with low-income individuals to improve their financial outcomes, support a move towards economic stability, and, thus, achieve food security.

The social service community contains the innovations that, when studied, can show us what works. At LEO, we spend our time engaging with those poverty fighters on the front lines and bring to the table the research rigor to shine a light on the impact of their services. We do this because we believe that people in poverty deserve interventions that work. We conduct causal evidence building, typically through randomized controlled trials, with providers across the country to learn what works and then to ensure that evidence is used. We have witnessed our partners discover that something they are doing does not actually work, and then pivot and change their model for the good of those they serve. We have also seen our partners learn that something does work and scale up the service so they can serve more people in their local communities and break into new markets with a proven intervention. We need you as policymakers to see this, too.

The gap between policymakers, academics, and social service providers is wide. We need local, innovative solutions implemented by dedicated service providers, paired with academics to help discover evidence of what works, and then scaled up by your investment in them as policymakers.

In closing, ending hunger begins with the safety net, but it does not stop there. We need comprehensive solutions for people working to achieve a life outside of poverty. Evidence-based programs and policies will ensure we are offering families services that work. Chairman McGovern, I love your quote and I share your belief. I would suggest one addition: "We have the food, the ability, and the means to end hunger in America—what we lack is the political will, *the evidence-based programs and policies*, and moral courage to act *on them*." And I am with you—we must change that.