Hearing on Child Hunger Philadelphia City Council March 5, 2019

Make a Citywide Plan to End Hunger that Promotes Economic Security and Prevents Violence

Testimony by

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NOTE: Opinions in this testimony are those of Dr. Mariana Chilton & The Center for Hunger-Free Communities, and not those of Drexel University.





Thank you

Thank you very much to Councilmember Reynolds Brown and others for inviting me to testify today on child hunger.

Before we begin, I want to acknowledge that we are residing on the ancestral lands of the Lenni Lenape people that was stolen by our white predecessors who dispossessed an entire nation that came before us. I pay respects to their elders past and present. I hope that we can take a moment to also consider the many legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement that bring us together here today.

Also, thank you for your leadership in establishing the following new policies: in banning cashless businesses, instituting a fair work week, preventing eviction, reducing arrests, ending the racist practice of stop and frisk, raising wages for city contract workers, the soda tax and subsequent investments in community schools and child care supports. All of these changes will help to improve conditions for low income families. These policy changes will indirectly help to reduce child hunger.

Introduction

I have carried out research on hunger and poverty for the past 18 years while based at Drexel University. Through my participation in the multisite research study Children's HealthWatch (which has been ongoing since 2005) we have interviewed over 11,000 Philadelphia families about food insecurity, employment, public assistance, discrimination, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) which includes caregivers' childhood exposures to physical, and emotional abuse and neglect, witnessing violence, or having an incarcerated parent. Through our programs we have worked to understand the best ways to solve food insecurity, inform policy change, and enact programmatic intervention. What I describe below is rooted in empirical evidence that is based both on science and human experience.

But first I want to describe to you what a mom told me in one of our research studies at a food pantry back in 2003. I asked, "does getting these free groceries help you?" "She said, "it helps a little bit. But it's like I am on a carousel, going round and round. This just takes off one horse, but the carousel is still going around, and I am stuck on it. I've got to pay rent, child care, transportation, utilities bills. So, next month, I still have the same burdens. I just can't seem to make enough money."

I hope that the city can help stop this dizzying and inescapable struggle for parents and commit to end hunger in the city. It is the least we can do to begin to repair a generations-long legacy of plunder and discrimination.

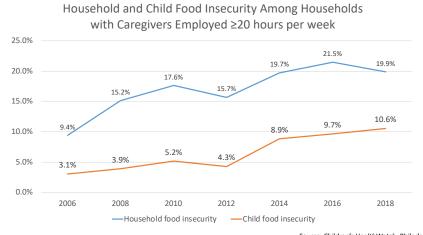
Definitions of Child hunger

It's important to be clear about what we mean by *child hunger*. It's understood in this hearing that we're talking about the problem of *children affected by food insecurity*.

Household food insecurity is lack of household access to enough food for an active and healthy life due to economic circumstances.¹ Even the mildest forms of household food insecurity affects young children.² Household food insecurity is associated with increased pediatric hospitalizations, children's developmental risk, and poor overall health of parents and children. Household food insecurity also affects children's school performance. Among adolescents, it is associated with suicidal ideation. Among mothers, food insecurity is associated with a doubling in risk of anxiety and depressive symptoms.³⁻⁶

Child food insecurity is a severe form of household food insecurity. This is when parents admit that their child's diet has been compromised due to lack of money for food, or worse, that their child has gone hungry or has not eaten for a whole day. It is very rarely reported, because parents can usually buffer their children from the experience of hunger. They usually do this by going hungry themselves. If they cannot buffer their children, they are unlikely to admit it. When parents report that they cannot feed their kids, it means parents can no longer shield their children. It is under-recorded for obvious reasons: stigma, shame, inability to see children's suffering because one's own suffering is so great, and outright fear of having one's children taken away.

I would be happy to share data on food insecurity for the City based on Children's HealthWatch data. For today, I want to highlight that child hunger has tripled among families that are working *full time*. This suggests two very important things: that peoples' wages are not enough despite full time work, and that our social services and public benefits are not helping to prevent food insecurity.



Source: Children's HealthWatch, Philadelphia Total families employed ≥ 20 hrs / week since 2005=4,829

Causes of child hunger

- Low wages Exploitation and discrimination by some corporations and businesses
 - Those who have unpredictable work schedules, low pay, and seasonal work are more likely to report household food insecurity.⁹
 - In Philadelphia, compared to a dollar paid to white men, employers pay Latina women 58 cents, Black women 70 cents, and white women 89 cents.¹⁰
- Lack of wealth this is exacerbated by punitive welfare systems and laws governing assets, as well as the exploitation listed above.
 - The median wealth for single black women was found to be \$5. The median wealth for white women is \$42,600. And this the median wealth of white women is still only 61% of the wealth of white men.¹¹
 - The asset limits for participation in TANF is currently at \$1,000—it's at the same rate as it was in 1996. That same asset limit should be at least at \$1,500 based on inflation. Asset limits discourage saving and wealth building.

Broken social services systems.

Our research with SNAP and TANF participants has shown that constant churn in and out
of TANF and SNAP are associated with significant increases in food insecurity. Hunger
occurs when our government systems fail to support families in ways that are based on
reality and need. For instance, families often get cut off of SNAP and TANF before they
are financially stable, and this contributes to income volatility and food insecurity.¹²

Social isolation and depression

 Social isolation, depression and anxiety are strongly associated with household food insecurity among children.^{6,13,14}

• Exposure to violence and Discrimination

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) include but are not limited to exposure to sexual, physical, and emotional abuse/neglect, witnessing violence, and having an incarcerated parent. ACEs are scored on scale from 0-10, with 10 being the highest level of aversity. Our study with 1,255 caregivers of young children in Philadelphia found that caregivers with 4 or more ACEs had higher odds of reporting food insecurity compared to those with 0 ACEs. When stratified by depressive symptoms and controlling for confounders, caregivers with 4 or more ACEs were 28.8 times as likely to report very low food security (95% CI=12.8, 64.8), what caregivers and most frontline providers experience as hunger, compared with those without ACEs and depressive symptoms. Food assistance did not attenuate the associations between ACEs and food insecurity.¹⁵
- Severity of food insecurity is linked to generations of violence exposure such a sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, racism, and gun violence.^{7,8,16-18}
- Racial and ethnic discrimination are an oft-neglected form of social, political, and
 economic violence that can cause trauma. Results in our newest study with 1,483
 caregivers of young children in Children's HealthWatch demonstrated that experiences of
 racial/ethnic discrimination (EOD) in multiple settings are significantly associated with
 food insecurity. For instance, compared to those without EOD, those that reported EOD
 in schools and in the workplace were 2 times more likely to report household food
 insecurity (95% CI 1.54, 2.71).

Solution: Create a City-wide Plan to End Hunger

These causes of child hunger should encourage the city's solutions to go far beyond food provision to promote income equality, improve our current systems or re-envision them altogether, invest in solidarity and community, and prevent violence and discrimination. These can all be undertaken under the auspices of a single solution.

Commit to creating a city-wide plan to end hunger in Philadelphia. Commit the staffing to work on the plan, make it public, hold City Council and the Mayor accountable. Announce and back up this plan to end hunger through a city ordinance.

To address child hunger comprehensively, City Council should make a public commitment that is backed by a comprehensive strategy supported, overseen, and carried out by full time staff with a public accountability mechanism. Staff should report to the highest levels of city government. Without this, there is little accountability, much less a comprehensive strategy, and there will be little movement on improving child hunger.

These plans should be grounded in a family-oriented approach (two generation) and adopt a human rights framework that helps to support the following: 1) increase family income and assets and 2) reduce and prevent family, community, and systemic violence.

Family-oriented approach

When kids are going hungry, it doesn't just mean that a child is in distress – it means the entire family is in distress. When families are in distress, it means the city is in distress.

The best way to help families is to take a two-generation approach. ¹⁹⁻²¹ That is—take a family centered approach, rather than simply invest in programs that only help kids and/or only help adults. Families need opportunities to grow and heal together. When kids are going hungry, it means their parents need help with income, housing, energy assistance, mental health and employment opportunities. Caregivers also need to be safe and supported.

Food as a Fundamental Human Right

A human rights approach asserts that everyone has the right to healthy food and to be free from hunger.^{22,23} This is different than a "charity" approach, where people are considered to be passive recipients of things they cannot choose and are not recognized as agents of their own destiny and worth.^{24,25} In the City of Philadelphia, there should be no celebration of food given as charity. A well-known form of charity consists of emergency food provision that is predicated on inconsistent donations. In this system there is no public accountability. Hours of operation are often ad hoc, sometimes food pantries are closed when they say they will be open, there are inconsistent eligibility criteria, and the quality of food is often poor. When people go to receive secondhand/donated food, they often feel a sense of shame, humiliation, and disempowerment.

In my research, I heard again and again that people feel as if they have to leave their "dignity at the door" to go to a food pantry.

The majority of people who are food insecure do not use food pantries. They use SNAP and WIC; both are forms of entitlement. The city should invest in programs where people are provided choice and receive assistance to which they are entitled in ways that their dignity is respected. To respect, protect and fulfill the right to food, the city should devise a comprehensive plan to end hunger, that works to increase people's incomes and to prevent violence.

1. Increase income and assets & Expand federally funded nutrition assistance

Child hunger occurs because parents are not earning a living wage and are being denied their entitlements to adequate and meaningful support. Those that cannot work also need to receive more than the amount to which they are currently entitled to by law. There are many ways to help increase the amount of money that families can earn or receive.

Supplement wages and incentivize higher wages

- The median wage of the people we interviewed at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children have not changed since 2006 -- It has hovered around \$10. Due to inflation, the same \$10 is now worth about \$8 dollars in 2019. Given the success of supplemental employment during the Great Recession, the city ought to consider supplemental employment for low wage professions such as child care workers and home health aides because about 50% of people employed in these sectors (mostly women of color) report very high rates of food insecurity.²⁶
- Businesses should be incentivized to raise wages for all employees. City Council should consider creative tax laws that benefit those companies who pay their employees well enough so that their employees do not need to rely on SNAP benefits to supplement wages.

• Supplement the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

- City council can also help address food insecurity through innovative ways of supplementing the Earned Income Tax Credit. EITC has been demonstrated to provide families with opportunities to pay off debt and build assets.²⁷ It improves the health and future opportunities for children whose families receive these funds.^{28,29} Unfortunately, 17.4% of PA eligible EITC tax filers do not claim it.³⁰
- Further, the city can look to negotiate with the state of Pennsylvania to match the federal EITC, as Massachusetts and 29 other states have done.³¹ These matches will help working Philadelphia families keep more of what they earn, and allow more families in our city to reap the financial, physical and mental health benefits of economic growth.³² Philadelphia can also choose to match the EITC as other cities have done, including New York City and Washington, DC (40% match rate)³¹. The EITC has been shown to be one of the most effective methods at alleviating poverty.³³

• **No strings attached income** for TANF-eligible people

• It is no surprise that TANF pays about \$4.25 per hour for people's time. The TANF allotment, which is around \$400 for a mother and 2 young children, is appallingly low. This paltry sum is provided only if a mom complies with outdated, punitive

systems hell-bent on compliance. Philadelphia should be the first in the nation to implement basic income, no strings attached. This was started in Canada, where a new report finds that people receiving basic income reported fewer health problems and a greater ability to buy healthy food, to find work, improve their education and secure stable housing.

Supplement SNAP and WIC

 Research has shown that a monthly \$30 supplement during the summer months added to the current SNAP or WIC benefit reduces food insecurity by 30%. Given the overall low participation in summer feeding programs, the city could take the lead in reducing food insecurity among children through supplementing SNAP and WIC benefits, when school meals are not available.³⁴

Make sure all childcare programs are participating in the CACFP

- Our Children's HealthWatch research has shown that participation in CACFP reduces food insecurity and improves health.³⁵ All childcare centers and family child care providers that serve low-income families should receive support to tap into these federal nutrition dollars. This could then offset dollars to pay child care workers a living wage.
- Expand summer feeding programming to all rec centers and libraries and keep them
 open throughout the entire summer holidays to keep continuity with the school calendar
 - The City of Washington, D.C. has the best record in drawing down federal dollars for the summer feeding program and they utilize their public libraries as places that support children's learning and their nutrition. Philadelphia can learn from D.C. how to do this.

Savings accounts for families with young children

- Families need help and support to break the intergenerational transfer of poverty. Research has shown that if a child has a savings account, it can improve socioemotional health of child and parent, and increase the likelihood of a child going to college. 36-38 San Francisco and St. Louis already do this.
- The number of children under age 5 living at or below the poverty line in Philadelphia is about 42,000. This is the same as seating in Citizen Bank stadium. A \$1 surcharge on those seats could start to fill the bank accounts to invest in the future of Philadelphia's children. This could transform Philadelphia's reputation as the poorest biggest city to the city that cares most about its children and their futures.

2. Link violence prevention with anti-poverty & nutrition programming

When exposure to violence is so strongly associated with household food insecurity, current public assistance programs can help only so much. The city must do everything it can to reduce community violence, household, and gender-based violence, violence in its systems, and racial and ethnic discrimination. Here are some ways to do this.

- Utilize WIC offices as places to screen for and refer appropriately for Intimate Partner Violence
- Infuse all city-funded social services with trauma-informed approaches that utilizes a culture of safety and focuses on healing by realizing, recognizing, and responding to how

- exposure to trauma shapes behavior, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships.^{39,40}
- Though the County Assistance Offices in Philadelphia are state-run, the city could partner
 with the PA Department of Human Services to provide trauma-informed training, and
 make the waiting areas pleasant and colorful, with comfortable seating and child friendly
 spaces. While waiting to apply for public benefits, families would feel respected and
 valued.
- Adopt an anti-racist anti-discrimination agenda for all city systems.⁴¹ Review all
 programming and funding mechanisms to ensure equity throughout. Consider adopting
 and implementing a public process through which the city seeks to undo racism and
 discrimination in all its functions.⁴² This could start with ensuring equitable garbage
 collection and punishing mortgage companies for discrimination against home buyers of
 color.
- Build up programs that increase and improve positive social connection, cooperative enterprises, and sharing economies.

Follow the evidence

Reducing food insecurity is quite possible. I have provided several ideas for the way forward, most of which have strong evidence to support they will work. While these violence prevention provisions have yet to be tried, I have strong research results that shows that trauma-informed approaches to social services programming can have profound effects.

Our program, the <u>Building Wealth and Health Network</u> (The Network), which works with caregiver's of young children receiving TANF focuses on improving economic security by fostering asset building *and* it utilizes a trauma-informed approach that promotes social connection and cooperation (helping to address exposure to violence). Here are the results: Participation in the Network reduced the odds of household food insecurity overall by 56%. For those that had high ACEs, it reduced the odds of household food insecurity by almost 70%. There was no food involved.

What the Network did was take a restorative, healing approach that helps people to expand their social connections and promote their ability to "pay themselves first." That is, to start saving with a conventional credit union savings account. Our program was able to match their savings 1:1.

If a program like ours could reach to scale – we could in all likelihood cut child hunger rates in half within a generation.

But the city must make an investment and take a transformative approach. Otherwise, we'll just keep "going round and round" like the frustrated mom I interviewed many years ago.

Let's end this cycle. It is possible. City Council can do it.

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