



DREXEL UNIVERSITY  
Center for  
Hunger-Free  
Communities

**Testimony of  
Barbie Izquierdo  
Witnesses to Hunger**

**Committee on the Budget  
United States House of Representatives**

***Hearing  
A Progress Report on the War on Poverty:  
Lessons from the Frontlines  
April 30, 2014***

Chairman Paul Ryan and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for requesting and considering my written testimony. My name is Barbie Izquierdo. I am a single mother of two kids. I have a daughter, Leylanie, who is 8 years old and a son, Aidan, who is 6 years old. I am a member of the Witnesses to Hunger program, a growing group of parents who speak out as expert witnesses on hunger and poverty in America.

I joined Witnesses to Hunger as the first member, on one of the scariest and most stressful days of my life. I had been living in an unheated house and the cold temperatures were the reason my son was losing his vision. Knowing that because I couldn't afford heat, my son was suffering, was killing me. But I was doing the absolute best I could.

I was in the emergency room facing the fact that my son would need surgery to correct the problem or risk losing his sight. At that moment, I knew I needed to speak out. I needed to share my story so other mothers did not have to face the impossible choices I was facing – impossible choices that no mother should ever face.

Today, I am continuing to fight for a better life. I am attending Esperanza College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I am thrilled to have this opportunity and hope it will put me in a better position to take care of my family, but for now it's a struggle. It is not as if I can tell my kids when they are hungry that they can eat in two years when I graduate and find a good paying job. And with this job market, who knows?

I rely on programs to help my family survive while I further my education. I am living on the frontlines of poverty and have learned many lessons from my experiences.

## Assistance Programs

Too often government leaders have the wrong idea about people in poverty. The truth is, no one wants to be on assistance programs. It is hard to apply and qualify for assistance programs. To receive the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) you have to be starving. But what defines starving? If you are not able to eat for a day, are you starving? In your eyes, of course! But that often doesn't get considered under the guidelines of public assistance programs.



**My Neighbor's Kitchen:** *"You never know what goes on behind closed doors. When something breaks, we may not be able to fix it because we have limited income. It's really hard to try to get everything fixed. How would my neighbor actually try to work with something like that? Being in a situation like that, your kids can stay hungry." - Barbie*

I grew up in poverty. I knew what it was like as a child to eat cans of spaghetti seven days a week because that was all that we could afford. When I had kids, I swore to myself that my kids would never taste it. Because, to me, that was the breakfast, lunch, and dinner of my childhood.

But then I lost my job working as a customer service representative. Without that job I had to rely on assistance programs to survive. It is humiliating to ask for help, but what choice did I have? It was: apply for SNAP or starve. Once you are approved to be on a program, the benefits are never enough to make ends meet. SNAP benefits run out with one or two weeks left in a month. That's seven to fourteen days where I do not know what I will eat, or more importantly, what my kids will eat. Every day becomes a struggle just to do something as simple as eat. Focusing on finding a job or anything else is not possible when you are hungry all the time.

Watching my kids eat cans of spaghetti broke my heart. But it was all I could afford and at least they had food in their bellies.

My kids have come home hungry, but sometimes there is nothing in the fridge to feed them. I would eventually find something I know isn't the most nutritious meal. But it is food. So I throw it together and hide in the other room while they eat. I don't want them to see that there is not enough for me to have anything. On nights when I know they haven't had enough to eat I put them to bed early, hoping they won't want a snack because I just don't have anything left.

Is this how we want families living in America today? I will do anything to protect my kids. I will apply for each and every assistance program, travel from food pantry to food pantry, and go without eating myself if need be. But shouldn't we want to do better?

Shouldn't we want our assistance programs to actually help families and not keep them down? I so appreciate the SNAP program and I believe it can be made better and stronger to ensure that families do not have to struggle to eat like I have had to.

### Working Hard, But Not Getting Ahead

I have had many ups and downs in my life. Too often the programs meant to help families are ripped away just when you start to get your feet under you. One step forward, really means you end up taking two steps back.



*"I feel like American has this huge stigma of how families are supposed to eat together at a table, but they don't talk about what it takes to get you there. Or what's there when you're actually at the table." – Barbie in A Place at the Table*

This happened to me when I got a job with the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger through the Way to Work program. After being unemployed I was so happy to have a job. I was proud to be working, to have a place to go each day and to bring a paycheck home to support my family. Getting a job, I hoped, meant more stability with an increased income.

The Way to Work program was a great way to address the need for people in poverty to find work. It is a prime example of a program that, in theory and on paper, sounds great. But it didn't really work out the way it was intended.

That pride and joy I felt at first quickly disappeared when my benefits were cut. I understand that with increasing my income my benefits might go down, but the reduction was much more than what I was now bringing home. I was going to work everyday, helping other people apply for SNAP benefits, when my own were cut off. Having a job was not my ticket to self-sufficiency. It turned out it only made me fall deeper into poverty.

Having a job gave me hope; that program gave me hope. But in the end I was in a worse position. We should not cut people's assistance before they are ready—before they have been able to build up their own safety net through savings. They say that people should have three months of income saved up to help buffer families from sudden economic losses like medical emergencies, a car breaking down, or loss of a job. But when I lost food stamps within a few months of getting my new job, I had not had enough time to get out of poverty. So, my kids and I were hungrier than ever.

### Lessons

Chairman Ryan and this Committee are here today to talk about lessons from the frontlines. Taken from my own experiences, those of my family and friends, and of my

Witnesses to Hunger sisters and brothers below are what people who know poverty firsthand think:

**1) Being poor is hard work.**

No one is really “living” in poverty. They are surviving and sometimes barely able to do that. When you are poor, every single day, *every single moment*, is a struggle. You need to decide whether you buy diapers for your baby or pay for rent. Impossible decisions. You need to stretch every single dollar, even if that means taking 3 buses and half a day to go food shopping at a store that has cheaper options.

While there are systems to help people in poverty, they are not always functioning in the most helpful way. Case managers are over worked, assistance offices do not provide needed resources, and no one wants to spend their day waiting to fill out forms only to have them lost. More needs to be done to make applying for programs a dignified and efficient process where applicants are given access to resources and information that can help their families to thrive.

**2) Benefits need to be increased.**

When you are relying on programs because you have nowhere else to turn, and you are still struggling to put food on the table, it is impossible to have hope. How can I see my life getting better when I fight for my SNAP benefits but they don’t last because the allotment is not enough for a healthy diet? How am I giving my kids their best chance when all they have to eat are processed food because that was all I could afford?

We need to take a look at the long-term impacts of giving people less than what they need to survive. If we don’t, we will end up paying for it down the road as the health of our children suffer. Not having heat caused my son to suffer. He has also had issues with developmental delay. No child should suffer because their parents cannot afford the basic necessities.

**3) Work should be rewarded.**

When people work full time they should make a living wage—not a “minimum wage” that demands that families apply for public assistance benefits to feed their kids. If I work, I want to be paid my worth—not forced to feel as if I still have to rely on the government. Businesses should pay sufficient wages, instead of relying on the government to supplement those wages.

Also, if I work and still make such a low wage that I have to rely on benefits, then those benefits should work to actually *get me out* of poverty, and do so for good. Getting that job or that raise you have worked so hard to get should never mean that you or your family should struggle *more*. When benefits are cut or reduced as people finally start to

move to self-sufficiency, it only forces them deeper into poverty. Instead of just cutting benefits as incomes increase slightly, they should be provided in a manner that allows the person to steadily move out of poverty.

Work supports should gradually phase out as incomes rise in order to avoid families being ‘penalized’ for raises or promotions. So much attention is spent on the application process for programs, but no consideration is given to how someone will gently exit a program. If we want families to break out of the cycle of poverty, how they move off of any assistance program needs to be a national priority.

#### **4) Listen to people who have experienced poverty.**

Today, as you consider poverty and “lessons from the frontlines,” I encourage you to talk to people like me—people who are and have been poor and hungry. Poverty is an issue affecting over 50 million Americans, yet so rarely are we invited to the table to share our expertise. Come to our neighborhoods, see for yourself the environment in which we have to raise our kids. It’s not pretty. You cannot understand it until you see it and feel it. I personally invite each of you, and any member of Congress, to come to my neighborhood in North Philadelphia. To get a feel for it, walk in my shoes a little in the documentary called *A Place at the Table*. See for yourself, then come to my neighborhood, and experience the poverty all around you. It will change how you make your policies, and the people you talk to will provide you with wisdom that you can’t get from your legislative aids or from a think tank report. We are America’s brain trust on poverty. You should tap into it.

#### **Conclusion**

I appreciate that poverty is being discussed and that programs that help families are being considered. As this Committee and this conversation moves forward we need to honestly look at what is working and what is not. There is a lot of good being done to help families in poverty, but unfortunately it is not enough. We need to bolster and strengthen programs that are working – not cut them. We need to find what is not working and fix it – not throw out all of the programs because some might need some changes. We need to work together to find solutions – not bicker about who is right and who is wrong.

We need to do better for my kids and for the millions of other kids hardly living in poverty today. I ask you to work hard. I promise I will do the same.

*Witnesses to Hunger is a program of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities at Drexel University’s School of Public Health.*