

**Philadelphia City Council
Joint Committees on Education and Housing**

Public Hearing: Emergency Lunches

**Testimony by Tianna Gaines-Turner
Witnesses to Hunger
March 14, 2016**

Good morning, and thank you the opportunity to testify on the need for emergency school meals.

My name is Tianna Gaines-Turner, I am 37 years old, and I am an active member of Witnesses to Hunger, a research and advocacy program that features the photographs and voices of those who know the experience of raising children on a limited income firsthand. We are a growing group of parents who speak out as the true experts on hunger and poverty in America.

My husband and I have three children in the Philadelphia public school system – a son in 6th grade and twins in 2nd grade. As a low-income mother of three children with disabilities, I know the importance of school meal programs. My family is one of over a hundred thousand low-income Philadelphia families that depend on free school breakfast, lunch, and afterschool snacks to guarantee that my children have access to nutritious food. They ensure that my children receive a quantity and quality of food I could not afford otherwise, even as a SNAP benefit recipient. These school meal programs ease the financial burden on my family, allowing us to put money that would otherwise be spent on food toward other necessities like housing, utilities, and medical costs.

Unfortunately, my children are not always able to access these necessary school meals due to unforeseeable circumstances. For some children, snow days are a cause for celebration, but not for families like mine that rely on public assistance programs. When school is unexpectedly closed for emergencies such as snowstorms, it is often a struggle to feed my children healthy and filling meals.



Every month, I carefully budget and allocate my funds and benefits to make sure I can keep my family housed, healthy, and well-fed. We are spread thin as it is. It is difficult enough to budget for my children's upcoming spring break and all the extra meals I'll have to provide, and that is something I am able to plan for in advance. Unlike spring break, I cannot adequately plan for emergency school closings, which places an unexpected and undue burden on my family and low-income families like mine.

The struggle is even worse when schools unexpectedly close near the end of the month. Anyone who has experience with SNAP benefits knows that the end of the month is always difficult. Many low-income families like mine run low on food by the end of the month. If schools close unexpectedly near the end of the month, it is nearly impossible to provide the quality and quantity of food my children deserve on an insufficient income. And we cannot expect local food pantries to solve this problem. There is already too much strain on pantries, they can't guarantee enough food or that the food is nutritious, and most pantries are not even open when schools are closed due to emergencies. We want our children to have access to the nutritional meals they have at school, not the oodles of noodles we can afford to provide them at home.

When schools unexpectedly close and I can't rely on school meals to feed my children, it has a ripple effect on my family's ability to pay for other essential expenses. Most low-income families already have to play the juggling act: PECO or Pathmark? Pay the energy bills or buy food? Pay for medical expenses or meals? Emergency school closings increase the financial burden and force parents to make even more impossible tradeoffs. No family should have to choose between paying a bill or putting food on the table. If the city provided free breakfast and lunch even when schools are closed, it would ease stress and reduce the number of impossible choices parents are often forced to make.

No school also often means no work for working parents. I work as an after-school teacher. When school is closed for emergencies, I am not able to work and make an income. But this situation doesn't just apply to people working in education. When schools are closed for emergencies, working parents often have to stay home with their children – either because they don't have another option for childcare, or because their work is closed too. No work means less income, and no school means more money is needed to feed children who would otherwise be receiving free school meals.

When schools unexpectedly close, it places a disproportionate burden on low-income families like mine, and a disproportionate burden on our city's most vulnerable children. Because of these struggles that my family knows firsthand, I support the proposed bill to implement a child feeding program when schools are closed due to emergencies. There is nothing like the pain of looking into your child's eyes and telling them that there isn't enough to eat. If the city provided meals during emergency school closings, it would guarantee that our children are well fed no matter what. Families would be able to predict a nutritious meal for their children, even if they can't predict the weather.

It would increase stability for low-income families. It would reduce the amount of impossible trade-offs, and give us the ability to put funds toward other necessities. It would ease the constant stress and struggle of being low-income in Philadelphia. This proposed bill would make a huge difference in my life, my children's lives, and the lives of over a hundred thousand other low-income families in Philadelphia who rely on school meals to keep their children happy and healthy.



Photo of a typical school lunch taken by Tianna

I don't want a hand out, I want a hand *in* creating a solution. As a mother of three who is directly impacted by emergency school closings, I hope you will strongly consider my testimony going forward. Life is unpredictable enough as it is – with medical situations, job losses, and other crises. Wondering where your children are going to get their next meal when school unexpectedly closes should not have to be added to that list. Our children deserve access to nutritious food regardless of the situation. No child should ever have to go hungry. At the end of the day, I urge you to think about the children. I urge you to move this bill forward.

Thank you for your time, and thank you for considering my testimony.