

Witnesses to Hunger

**Testimony of Joanna Cruz
Member of Witnesses to Hunger**

**before the
National Commission on Hunger**

**Washington, DC
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Distinguished members of the National Commission on Hunger, thank you for considering my testimony today.

I am Joanna Cruz. I am a proud mother, hard worker, and entrepreneur.

I am a member of Witnesses to Hunger. Witnesses to Hunger is a group of women and men who share their personal experiences with hunger and poverty. We take pictures of our own lives to show what poverty truly looks like. We are experts on hunger and we speak for ourselves, our children, and our communities. Today I would like to speak with you about my own experiences and invite you to get to know my Witnesses brothers and sisters so you can truly understand the hunger that exists in this country.



To show you what poverty in America can look like I want to share with you a picture. This is a picture of a kitchen - of my kitchen. This was taken 6 years ago when I lived in a house with no heat and no running water. My two kids, ages 2 and 6, lived here with

me. I tried my best to take care of my kids but despite my efforts, my kids were always sick and we were often in the hospital because of our living situation.

As you can imagine, I measured as Very Low Food Secure when I lived here. I took the USDA's food security survey and was able to report what I knew all along – that we were hungry. I struggled to find ways to feed my kids in a kitchen that looks like this. I would cook dinner on a hot plate in the one pot I had. I was scared to ask for help because I was afraid of what might happen to me and my kids. I always made sure my kids knew not to talk about what was happening at home with anyone at school. I didn't feel safe seeking help and am sure there are many people living in similar or even worse conditions who put on a brave face because of the fear of people knowing the truth. The fear of the judgment they will face and the fear that their children could be taken away. This fear is so strong that coming forward can seem impossible, but I am here to tell you we exist and we need help.



My Little One

She's only six. She just does what she has to do. She doesn't complain, does not complain at all. That's the way it is. Maybe I'm teaching her moral values to be a stronger person, or to say 'I'm never going to live like this.' I hope so. I hope she has it in her head that I'm never going to ever, ever, live like this, ever again in my life. When she gets older, I want her to grow up to be a better person.

I was so ashamed of this kitchen and it is still hard for me to look at this picture and remember living in that house. No one wants to – and no one should - live that way. I am so thankful not to live in such a place any longer. But for many Americans this is still their reality. Behind locked doors families are struggling. They are making impossible decisions between buying food for their family or keeping a roof over their head. Many Americans don't have running water or heat their homes using their stoves. These are unacceptable conditions that no family should face but many do.

As parents we try our best and we want the best for our kids. I am so proud of my children and I think they can accomplish whatever they put their minds to given the right opportunities. I hope today you think of my kids and all kids. We need to stop blaming people for their situation and stop drawing a line between who we think are deserving and undeserving. You want to know how to address hunger in this country? The only way change is going to happen is if we all work together. If we all commit to end hunger and make sure that no child goes to bed hungry. Until we make that commitment and until we stop judging people, change will not happen and our children will continue to be hungry.

I have come a very long way since that kitchen. I could not find support in Philadelphia to fix my home so I made the difficult decision to leave that stability behind and move my children to live with my mother. I now consider myself lucky because I had somewhere to go but many other families are forced out of their homes because they cannot manage the necessary repairs.

I now live in New Jersey in a house that is warm and where I can wash my hands or fill a pot with water. Despite the change in my life I still cannot make ends meet.

I work 35 hours a week cooking food for other people, while struggling to feed my own family. I work the night shift so I am there to care for my children during the day – meaning that in addition to being hungry, I am tired all the time.

While I am in a better place today, the trauma of living in such bad conditions still haunts me. I still live in fear. Fear of a utility company coming to shut off power or water even if I know the bills are paid. I'm still scared. I still count every meal everyday for fear there will be a day we will again be without food. I am still haunted by the trauma of me begging my daughter not to cry about being hungry. To this day she will only tell me she's hungry once. After that she will stay quiet and not ask again just in case there is not food.

There is also the pain we as parents go through everyday knowing how bad things can get. Or how bad things have been and how scared we are to go back to another hungry, cold, scared night with sleeping kids who haven't gotten a bath in days.

But I am here today to share these struggles with you so that you can understand the true face of hunger in this country. The hungry are our kids. They are the hard working parents that are trying to survive and hope one day to thrive. We do not want to have to rely on programs like SNAP and WIC, but they are lifelines for us. Every time they are cut we feel it – our kids feel it. A few dollars less in SNAP may seem small but a few dollars means the difference between having something to eat or going to bed hungry.

I want my kids to be smart, finish school, and get good jobs. But there are some weeks when my paycheck is so small that I have to choose between bus fare to get to work and feeding my kids before I leave. I cannot let them starve so I use any money I have to feed them first. This often means I do not eat myself. As their parent I do everything in my power to buffer them from our struggles.

I have been talking about hunger and poverty for 6 years. I have spoken at numerous conferences, events, been interviewed by different media outlets, and yet I still struggle to make ends meet. I hope today that you will really listen to what I am saying and take it to heart. We need real changes in this country. I don't want my kids to suffer and

struggle as I have, so please let's work together to make some changes. Here are some things you can do to help us make those changes take place:

1. Listen to, learn from, and work with people who know hunger first-hand before any policies or programs are created, cut, or changed.
2. Increase the SNAP allotment so families are not running out of food before the end of the month. The current SNAP allotment is simply not enough to buy nutritious food and have it last for more than a week or two. I often have to choose between food that is healthy for my family and food that will fill our bellies. Unfortunately ensuring there is something to eat will always win over having nutritious options. Of course I want my children to eat healthy, but that is just not an option when the money just isn't there. Until congress takes action on to increase the minimum wage programs like SNAP need to be able to adequately fill that gap.
3. Invest in technology and customer service. The process of applying for benefits is a frustrating and painful experience. Paperwork is often lost or misplaced meaning that benefits are delayed. If I am applying for SNAP, I do not have enough to feed my family. Any delay in getting benefits has huge impacts. We are hungry today and a delay of even a few days can be devastating.
4. Work together to create a national plan, that is fully funded, and that will actually address hunger in this country. Hunger is a solvable problem. We have enough food in this country to make sure everyone is fed. The frustrating thing is that still 16 million children do not have enough nutritious food to eat. That is an embarrassment for our country and we must work together to create a plan to address it.

Addressing hunger is about dealing with basic human dignity. We must all recognize that we are worth it and we have value. I hope this Commission can find a way to make solid recommendations to Congress that will make positive, lasting, and impactful changes.

For more information about the Witnesses to Hunger program contact Natalia Cardona at nc544@drexel.edu or Kate Scully at kate.scully@drexel.edu and visit www.centerforhungerfreecommunities.org