

*Good morning Commissioners,*

*Thank you for asking me here today to speak about my experience with food insecurity and provide policy recommendations, or at least a perspective to consider while you contemplate your task.*

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My name is Sarah Palmer. I am a former CalFresh Recipient. In addition to CalFresh, I received WIC and benefited from the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. I am here on behalf of over 4 million Californians helped by these programs, and millions more (most of them children of working people) who could be hungry less often if these programs were more accessible. And although I cannot speak for them, I can certainly share my story and tell you that I am not much different from anyone I've ever met who is participating in these programs.

I have been working since I was 13. My mother was a cook, and I worked with her in those kitchens: first as a dishwasher, a prep cook, a busser, and a server. In the summer I would clean cabins during the day and go straight to the restaurant at night. Hard work is not unfamiliar to me and as an adult I often had two jobs. I found myself at home in the food industry. I put myself through culinary school and went on to work in some of the best restaurants in the Bay Area. The hours are long, the work is hard, and the return for someone who didn't absolutely love it would be hard to reconcile.

While in a relationship, I got pregnant. Though unplanned, it was not unwelcomed. My boss was supportive and as a mother herself she warned me that the professional life of a chef does not bode well for motherhood, and she was right. I worked 10-14 hour days on my feet until I was eight months pregnant. My daughter was born in May of 2008. Her father had minimal involvement; shortly after her birth I realized I would be parenting alone, and although I established a child support case the payments were small and unreliable.

I knew that my situation was not sustainable and when my daughter was 4 months old I began taking online courses at a local community college while working  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. I was accepted at the University of California Davis, and graduated in 2012. I

eventually received a graduate degree—all the while working when I was able—and trying to be the best parent I could be.

The WIC and CalFresh benefits that my daughter and I received were essential while I was in school. They kept us from going hungry during months when we didn't receive child support and sustained my confidence through my continued education so that I could provide a stable home for my daughter while working toward a life that would *prove* to be more sustainable. We received the maximum CalFresh benefit allowed for a family of two, and like many, there was nothing supplementary about it. All of my money went to my high cost of rent and childcare, CalFresh (SNAP) was our primary source of food. With WIC and produce from Davis Korean Church's food pantry once a week we were able to eat for the month. However, as much as I tried to ration, I found myself forgoing fruits and vegetables toward the end of the month so that my daughter would have enough.

WIC, in California, has yet to implement Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) payments and so still delivers coupons. As a result, the program is difficult to use. A trip to the store often ended in frustration and sometimes tears after experiencing store clerks having to close down checkout lines in order to manage the perforated coupon transaction, referencing three ringed binders, sending product back in exchange for the accepted type of brand product-line, all the while absorbing hurried shoppers obvious irritation and judgment. Please do not get me wrong, the items I received while on WIC were a crucial part of our food supply, but the processes has to be improved and EBT payments should be implemented without delay. Modernization not only addresses issues of efficiency, but—if done well—can reduce unnecessary stress and stigma in an already stressful and vulnerable stage in a new mother's life.

The reports for CalFresh (SNAP) recertification require a lot of information and allow a short amount of time (about one week) to return according to the postmarked date, including proof of income, bank statements of the month (or months) in question, and proof of payment for any childcare expenses. I would have to go to a printing center, because I did not have a printer at home, to print out multiple bank statements. Proof of income required that I make photo copies of

my pay stubs. Proof of identification required copies of my driver's license and both of our Social Security Cards.

I had to ask the childcare center's administrative staff to print out a special receipt of payment. This often required me asking more than once and finally explaining to them that we were CalFresh recipients and that it was very time sensitive. This was humiliating, and I couldn't help but think that the entire staff looked differently at me—and maybe even my daughter—after I shared that information. Not long ago, I participated in a successful effort to change the law regarding childcare expense reporting here in California so it has improved- but there is more to do.

What I hope this testimony conveys is that it takes a lot of time to be poor. From the CalFresh application, to the recertifications, and the additional requirements-getting and maintaining CalFresh is difficult and time consuming. Imagine doing your taxes six times a year instead of just once. It is stressful and while trying to make it through the day-to-day challenges that poverty presented I found myself only able to do what was right in front of me, and that was overwhelming.

Please continue to look towards modernized operations and newly available technology, but remember, we need to be thoughtful about how these new technologies are used and how we can use them to expand access to people more difficult to serve- with the goal of setting excellent nationwide standards that easily translate to state and county systems. This is especially important when considering our exceedingly vulnerable refugee, migrant and homeless populations. I can't imagine how much *more* difficult this process would have been had I not had a physical address, if I spoke English as a second language, if I lived in a rural community, or if I was a person of color and experienced institutional racism. I cannot imagine. It makes little sense that intentional programmatic barriers designed to make programs harder to navigate, are upheld. This puts unnecessary stress on poor families, causes further inefficiencies in administrative processes and wastes resources.

Low-income individuals that need help shouldn't have to hope to know about the safety net programs they are eligible for, we should help them. I feel that it is my duty to urge the Commission to focus on the horizontal integration of these

important programs, and not only linking these resources but making the individual programs easy to navigate because it is a *social safety net, not a ropes course*.

Lastly, I am tired of the demonization of low-income people coming from people with little first-hand knowledge of what it is like to be on hard times. We need to look at the conditions that are creating so many food insecure people. These are symptoms of a greater problem in the United States. What if we made childcare more affordable, work schedules more flexible and living wages more attainable? Please realize, while contemplating prescriptive solutions that many low-income people are managing work, school, our homes, and our child's well-being successfully in spite of the many barriers that are that lay in our path. I urge us all to think about equitable solutions and policies that will lead low-income people and their families to *real* economic sustainability.