

Witnesses to Hunger

Testifying on Hunger and Poverty in America

www.witnesseshunger.org | Center for Hunger-Free Communities
At Drexel University

**Testimony of
Tianna Gaines-Turner**

**House Budget Committee
War on Poverty: Working With Families**

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Chairman Ryan and distinguished members of the House Budget Committee,

Thank you very much for inviting me to give formal testimony to help inform you about poverty in America, 50 years after America's "War on Poverty" was declared.

My name is Tianna Gaines-Turner. I am a member of *Witnesses to Hunger*, an extraordinary group of women and men—all of us parents—who know poverty firsthand. We speak from direct experience about the need for better paying jobs; safe and affordable housing; and safe streets, playgrounds and neighborhoods. We talk about improving our safety-net programs so that they can actually help get families out of poverty. We explain much about our lives through our own photographs.

I have known hunger and poverty first hand, and I am trying to break the cycle of poverty for my children. I invite you to visit my Philadelphia neighborhood so you can see for yourself. Today, I am bringing my neighborhood to you so we can expand your knowledge about hunger and poverty. This will give you ideas about what we need to do together as a nation.

I have three things to cover today:

- 1. What we have in common: the American Dream**
- 2. Characteristics of people in the inner city: creativity, entrepreneurship & hard work**
- 3. Three recommendations for solving poverty**
 - a. Provide living wages and family-oriented labor policies**
 - b. Improve the safety net to increase economic mobility**
 - c. Involve the people that have the answers**

1. What We Have in Common: The American Dream

Let's start with the things we have in common. If we focus on what we have in common, we can work together more effectively.

- *Courage.* We are courageous. Chairman Ryan you and your colleagues are courageous to hold these conversations about poverty, showing leadership among your peers to talk about issues often felt to be unspeakable or shameful. I too am courageous. I dare to speak up about poverty, hunger and homelessness not only among my family and my own community, but also on a national level so that the rest of the country can hear and take action.
- *Love of Country.* We love our country. You and your colleagues are serving your country. I applaud your willingness to lead. I express my patriotism through trying to make changes so that our country can be a leader in the world for democracy, civic participation and compassion for each other.

- *Love of God.* Just like many of you, I use lessons of the Gospel to influence my daily actions and to better understand the world around me. I believe that Christian values make us great citizens because we spread the word of love and understanding.
- *Love of Family.* We have a strong sense of family. My husband and I have a 10-year-old son, on the honor roll, and 6-year-old twins—a boy and a girl—who just graduated from kindergarten.

This is a picture of my family. My husband and I love being parents. Like all of you, we want the best for our children. We work hard to make a life of value, to pave the road to a good future for our kids. We invest a lot of time and energy into bringing out the best in our children through our encouraging words and loving example.

We see our children growing up, and getting ready to do good things for their community. We see in them the President, a doctor, a lawyer, a first grade teacher, or Chairman of the House Budget Committee.

When I look at my daughter, I strongly believe that I am raising a future President of the United States. My husband and I take our job of raising the President of the United States very seriously. But we take our job of raising our sons almost more seriously than the job of raising the President. Here's why: we are raising two young men who are African American. We know that they will face severe prejudice. So, they will have to work doubly hard. They will have to convince people over and over again that they are worthy of respect—because we understand that in America today, African American men are treated with suspicion or worse, outright hatred.

Solving poverty means joining together in making the American Dream

What we want most in the world is to *join in* the American dream. Just like I am joining in here to work with you to help us solve poverty, to fix our programs, to invest in something positive. My friends and neighbors of Philadelphia and beyond also want to join in.



2. Characteristics of people in the inner city: creativity, entrepreneurship & hard work

We are from the inner city

My husband is a hard-working man who currently works at a grocery store. He is a very loving, kind and hardworking man. He's an outstanding father and wonderful role model for our children, and for our country.

My neighbors and friends are not lazy. In fact, I see my family, friends and neighbors working just as hard as my husband and I do. I also know this because of my job. I start each day at 7:00 in the morning to provide childcare at a Philadelphia recreational facility. I take care of dozens of children ages 4-16. *All of their parents are working*—and they are relying on me to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their kids while they go to work.

I am a role model

Through my work, I am an excellent role model for the children in my neighborhood. I take care of them, and I encourage them. I tell them that they, too, could serve their country through being a member of Congress.

In my role as 23rd Ward Leader in Philadelphia, I help people come to the polls to vote. I help people express their right to participate in democracy regardless of whether they are poor or rich.



We are not alone. Let me tell you about some of my friends in Witnesses to Hunger



Sherita Mouzon, member of Witnesses to Hunger, and a neighbor of mine from the Frankford section of Philadelphia, has overcome painful circumstances. She was homeless as child – and now she helps out our neighbors and friends through her work at the Salvation Army. She helps women by running support groups. Sherita is married to Joe, who works full time and is the father of her daughter, Joanna. Joanna just graduated from kindergarten—just like my twins.

Margaret, from Baltimore, speaks out on the health benefits of WIC. She sees the difference it has made in the growth and development of her beautiful baby girl, Frankie. After suffering from domestic violence and hardship, she is now working on her degree in mortuary science.



Barbie Izquierdo is a Philadelphia mother of two kids. Barbie has known hunger so deeply that the way she sometimes made herself feel better was by looking at pizza menus and imagining that she ate the food in the pictures. She has become a nationally recognized spokesperson on hunger in America, through telling her story in the film *A Place at the Table*. While she was doing the film, she was also helping hungry families get connected to food stamps. Right now, she's working on her undergraduate degree on full scholarship. She is on the Dean's list.



Quanda, from Boston, struggled with poor housing and low wages. She just got a full time job as a child care specialist after completing her certification in early child development.



Joanna Cruz lives in southern New Jersey. She has overcome the worst kind of situation where she was working at such a low wage that she couldn't afford to pay her electricity and water bills, and was living in the house pictured here with her 6-year-old and her 2-year-old. She has since gotten out of that situation, and now she is working at a convenience store for slightly higher wages. To make extra money to pay her bills and invest in her kids' education, she is starting her own business selling her home-made all-natural beauty products and crocheted accessories. It's important that you know that she is working, *and* she's an entrepreneur.



If you look at my peers, my friends and me you see successful women and men, raising their children so beautifully. We do this with love and care. We are contributing to society, we are America's workforce, we are entrepreneurs.

Like millions of Americans, we have received some support from America's safety net. We all recognize that we could not be the successes we are today without opportunities for jobs, and without that safety net. We could do even more for our country if we were included in the decision-making. So, now I give my three recommendations.

3. Three recommendations for solving poverty

1. Provide living wages and family-oriented labor policies

I think we all agree: To get out of poverty, America needs jobs that pay a living wage.

Notice that I am not just saying we need "jobs;" we need "work." We already have jobs, and they're not enough. I am saying we need *good jobs that pay the value of your work*. So many American families are working—working full time, or cobbling together several jobs. But working families often cannot afford to pay rent; and sometimes they cannot afford to pay for food. I am talking about the working hungry. My friend Whitney has talked about being so hungry while she was taking the bus to work that the pain was unbearable. This should not happen in America.

America needs good jobs: here's how to do it:

1. *Give good tax breaks to companies that provide stable employment*

Companies need to stop the practice of hiring people part-time so they can profit more by not paying for health benefits and sick leave. So many hungry families have unstable jobs with unpredictable work hours. This practice must stop. Congress can help change this.

2. *Incentivize companies to provide paid sick leave & family leave*

When my son was sick, I had to stay at the hospital with him, so I couldn't go to work; my husband had to stay home with our twin babies, so he couldn't work. Here's the problem: neither of us had paid sick leave, so we lost hours on the job, and we lost pay, too. The result was we could not afford to pay our rent on time, nor our light bill. From there, we became homeless. Imagine the stress our family felt. We need to see moms and dads less stressed about whether or not they'll lose their job or their home when they have to care of their children when they are sick. With paid sick leave, we'd see healthier, more productive working families throughout the nation.

3. *Subsidize affordable, high quality childcare*

Safe, affordable, quality childcare is hard to come by in our



When One Child is Sick
When one child is sick, that means somebody has to stay home and take care of the child that's not sick. Every time he got sick again, their dad had to take off of work. That means: that's money we're missing. That means: do we pay the rent or do we pay the light bill? --
Tianna Gaines-Turner

communities. This makes it very difficult for parents like me to find steady work, or go back to school to further our educations. Childcare for very young kids, and high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4- year-olds, should be a top priority for Congress. By high quality I really mean high quality. Early in his life, my son was diagnosed not only with asthma, but also with epilepsy. My husband and I could not find affordable qualified child care providers. We suffered as a result. Providing for good quality affordable childcare would not only help build a smarter, more successful next generation workforce, but will also help parents to secure employment and support their families today. It makes today's workforce perform better for America.

Start by giving Head Start and Early Head Start enough money to reach all eligible families.

2. Invest in a safety net that supports and promotes economic mobility

I think companies that pay low wages should raise their wages, so that my family wouldn't have to rely on government benefits. In the meantime, do not cut nutrition, housing, or health care assistance programs. They keep America healthy.

Nutrition Assistance: One half of the people getting SNAP are kids. And 70% of two-parent families like ours that are getting SNAP are working. Without SNAP, my kids would go hungry; their health would be even more at risk. If you cut SNAP, you hurt America's kids, and you are crippling America's workforce.

Increase the SNAP allotment

The SNAP allotment should be larger so families do not run out of money for food before the end of the month. The Institute of Medicine did a study on the adequacy of the SNAP allotment. They proved that the allotment is not enough. People receiving SNAP have been saying this for years. But no one was listening. Now that the Institute of Medicine says it, maybe Congress will listen.

Keep WIC as is

WIC is an excellent source of good nutrition for pregnant moms and young kids. WIC has helped many of my friends and



Nutrition Makes a Difference
I ate really healthy when I was pregnant with her, with the help of WIC. I think there was a difference in her health because of the nutrition that I had gotten with her. I had poor health with my older children because of the unhealthy food I ate during my pregnancy, and it made a difference. WIC made a difference. Receiving WIC for the first year of her life helped her to be a healthy baby who has a good immune system and great developmental skills. *Margaret M., Baltimore*



Breakfast
With the money food stamps provide, I was able to feed her breakfast that morning. Without it what would she have eaten? I wanted to show that with the help she was able to eat breakfast that morning. She had cereal. She had milk. She didn't have to go without. *Crystal S., Philadelphia*

their kids. I know that it prevents low birth weight and it promotes child development.

Housing Assistance: My family and I have been homeless twice in the last several years. During this time we had also been on the waiting list for Section 8 (Housing Choice Vouchers) for over 10 years. When we were homeless, we were very stressed. You can see it in my kids' faces here. After much hardship, we were finally able to move into a house in Frankford.

Health Care: My husband and I make too much money at our jobs to be covered by Medicaid, but our jobs don't provide health care coverage. For years we were uninsured. It was stressful. We had medical bills we couldn't pay. If we could, we avoided going to the doctor at all. Just recently, we were able to get health care through the health care exchange. We are grateful for this coverage. It's especially important as I have epilepsy and high blood pressure. Now that I have health coverage I know that I can be more productive. I won't lose more days at work, and won't lose money because I am missing work. I'll also be able to take better care of my kids.



Being Homeless with Children

The hardship of being homeless with children is what I would like people to see. When you look into my children's faces and in their eyes in that picture, they're only 1 and 5 years old, but you can see the stress and the loneliness. *Tianna Gaines-Turner, Philadelphia, PA*

Improve the overall safety net in 5 ways

1. Invest in 21st Century Technology & Customer Service

I want to be really honest with you. The experience of applying for and maintaining public benefits is often painful and frustrating. Overall, case managers lack training in basic civility and kindness. They are also using technology that is not suited to the modern day. We need to move into the digital age, and there should never again be times where case managers shrug their shoulders and say they lost paper documents. Nor should a busy, working family be asked to hang on to tiny little paper receipts for years on end.

2. Fix the Cliff Effect

Let me tell you something that everyone who has ever been on public assistance knows. When families start to make a little bit more money on the job, they lose benefits too

quickly. It creates an economic shock. Then families are worse off. This makes it practically impossible to build our way out of poverty. We need to fix the system so that we can get out of poverty. My friend Barbie experienced this firsthand when she got a job helping people apply for SNAP benefits. She was so happy to finally have stable – and fulfilling – employment. But her small increase in wages made her lose benefits so quickly that her family felt the effects of hunger more severely than before. This falling off the cliff caused her great depression and stress and more suffering for her kids.

3. *Invest in education opportunities through the safety net*

The “Work First” policy doesn’t work. “Work First” to us means pushing us into low wage jobs that get us nowhere, with no hope for a future, no hope for escape from poverty. There are not enough opportunities to improve our educations so we can make better wages. My friend Quanda from Boston was on cash welfare. She was just one credit away from finishing her college degree in early childhood education. Her caseworker told her she had to withdraw from college, or she would lose her cash assistance. They forced her into a training program for *a low wage service job*. This is the wrong message, and the wrong thing to do. We need to invest in more educational opportunities that help move people **out** of poverty.

4. *Promote savings so that families can build their own safety net*

I’m going to tell you the truth. I didn’t have a bank account until a few years ago. I didn’t have one because I was afraid that our caseworker was going to take away the tiny bit of help we were getting to feed our family. I had a fear of saving a little money. We need to get rid of asset limits so that the case managers won’t scare us into hiding the tiny bit of money we make. People need help. They need encouragement. They need a program that is actually built to create economic mobility. Everyone who receives public assistance should be encouraged to save money. Each county assistance office should create opportunities for savings accounts and should promote entrepreneurship.

5. *Find solutions with a real task force*

I recommend that you invest funds into a special taskforce that has state administrators, public assistance recipients, and employers. This task force would work to identify the barriers in our systems, and build something better to create mobility.

People living in poverty—those who were born into it, and those who are down on their luck—want to get out of poverty. We want to create our own safety nets, so we never have to depend on government assistance again.

3. Invest in community solutions, run by people who know poverty firsthand

People who are poor work so hard, and we do so against all odds. We use our wits, our strategy, and our brilliance to survive and to feed our kids. We are great entrepreneurs.

This is why the most important thing that Congress can do is to create a system where people who are poor can work together to create their own solutions to poverty. People who live in poor communities should have official positions on community and state advisory boards that oversee the effectiveness of state and federal programs. Congress needs to think of people receiving benefits as expert shareholders. This brings me to my third recommendation: invest in the expertise of poor communities.

One of the most important aspects of the War on Poverty was the emphasis on the participation of people who are poor themselves. Back in the 1960s and early 1970s the federal government had the foresight to release funds through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to low income communities to ensure that that people who were living in poverty could be involved in developing solutions. But that money was taken away during the Reagan years, and later. This has created more difficulty for families born into poverty. It makes it seem to us that our policymakers want to keep us poor and uninvolved, and I am sure this is not true.

I suggest you start with the \$8.5 billion dollars that was taken from SNAP in the Farm Bill and invest it states around the country to encourage low-income communities to run health centers, feeding programs, screening programs, and to partner with community-based organizations and state agencies to improve programs that are already in place. It will have the greatest return on your investment, because it will ignite brilliant ideas from people who know poverty, and who have a strong personal interest in ending poverty for good.

I am not talking about what you call “block-granting.” I am talking about added funds that are invested to ensure that there is *accountability to people living in poverty* at the local, state and federal levels.

Conclusion: *Nothing about us without us*

Congress should not make any decisions about programs meant to help families living in poverty without people who know poverty first hand at the decision-making table.

Thank you for having me speak today. Today is a bold first step. But we need to see more. There should be no bill passed, no law passed without a strong analysis of how it will affect family poverty and how it will affect child hunger.

When the Budget Committee meets again, I promise that my colleagues from Witnesses to Hunger, and our partners from across the country, will be happy to work with you to identify solutions to American poverty. Poverty is America's most urgent security issue.

It's time to call in the experts. My family, my neighbors, and people like me know the solutions.

Thank you for inviting me in. I am happy to help.