

Testimony of
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Before the
U.S. Senate Committee on the Budget
“The Impact of Federal Budget Decisions
On Families and Communities”
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Good morning Chairwoman Murray and Senators of the Budget Committee.

I want to thank you for allowing me to speak about the impact federal programs for the middle class and low-income families have had on my family. I know from personal experience the importance of SNAP and other federal programs that work to provide a safety net for people in need. In particular, SNAP and WIC were there for my son, Nathan and me when we needed help to have food in our home.

I never thought that I would ever have the need to ask the government for help putting food on our table. I never thought that I would be so poor that food would be out of reach for me. But it all happened. I am thankful that these programs were available for me and my son so that I could focus on getting us out of poverty.

While I was pregnant with Nathan, his dad and I decided that I would be the stay at home parent. I was so excited to be there for every second of my son's life. When Nathan was born I left my job to stay home with him. The arrangement was working out just as planned until his father abruptly left me and my eight-month-old baby. He took all our money with him. I no longer had any income so I had to rely on savings and credit cards. Soon I was not able to afford our lifestyle and I had to make many changes. Nathan and I had to move from our comfortable home to government housing. The day we moved in, I decided that I was going to get us out as soon as possible. I did not want Nathan to grow up in poverty. I knew that I needed to go back to school so that I could someday provide for the two of us without help.

We lived on federal student grants and loans, including Pell Grants, credit cards and the grace of God for many months. As my credit card balances were increasing, my cash was decreasing. I started having trouble affording food. The trips to the grocery store became a game of what can I afford. I stopped buying meat and fresh produce because I only had a few dollars per trip. I began eating smaller portions so that Nathan could have nutritious meals. Then the time period between meals became longer for me. Sometimes I would eat one meal a day and other times, I would not eat at all. I knew that our situation was getting worse, and I did not know what to do. This was not a question of availability of food, but a question of affording it. I did not live in a food desert; I lived in a food mirage. I had many grocery stores around me but I could not afford to go in and shop.

One weekend in particular was just awful. That was the weekend that I knew I had to ask for help. I picked Nathan up from daycare just like any other Friday afternoon. As I was driving home I thought out loud, "What is for dinner?" I knew that the pickings were slim, but I did not realize how little we had in the house. When we got home I did something I

only had heard about, I rationed food. I realized that I had just enough food in the house for Nathan. Nathan ate and I did not.

I was studying for an exam but was distracted by my hunger. As I pointed out earlier, I had not been eating very well for months so the absence of food that weekend caused me to pass out. Come Monday morning I was so light-headed that I had trouble maneuvering through rush hour traffic. I cried the entire car ride. I had to pull over twice to gain my composure. Once we arrived at the daycare, I swallowed my pride and asked for help. I was put in touch with the local food pantry and was able to get immediate help from the daycare. I was told that I should apply for SNAP benefits because I had no income.

The first time I applied for food stamps, after waiting for hours, I was urged by the caseworker to withdraw my application. I felt as if the message was that I didn't deserve food.

I continued to receive food from the local pantry. I was very grateful, but the food from the pantry was very limited and I could only receive a food box twice a month. I managed but longed for the day that I could make a meal of my choosing. I wanted to pick out ingredients for recipes given to me by my grandmother. I wanted Nathan to grow up enjoying Sunday dinners like I did as a child.

One day at a parenting meeting at Nathan's daycare a woman from Just Harvest, a local anti-hunger organization, spoke to us about SNAP. I told her that I tried to apply but withdrew my application. She explained the process and guidelines to me. She offered to help me with the application. I went back to DPW and this time I was given SNAP benefits. I cannot put into words the feeling of relief that came over me. I felt like a more responsible mom. I knew I could now provide meat and fresh produce for Nathan.

I still remember that first trip to the grocery store. I was able to hand pick the tomatoes, apples, bananas and other produce to fill the hanging basket in my kitchen. Because of SNAP, I was a part of the regular food purchasing economy once again. I could shop just like other mothers. I am immensely grateful for SNAP, but I would be remiss if I did not say, given this wonderful opportunity today, what the Institute of Medicine (IOM) study last month also said: SNAP benefits are crucially valuable but not enough to get most families through the month.

I was able to lift Nathan and myself out of poverty by finishing school. SNAP was a critical factor in my success. Having SNAP benefits allowed me to focus energy on school so that I could support us. I no longer stressed over purchasing food. I graduated from community college with two associate degrees and was the student speaker at commencement. I went on to receive my bachelor's and master's degrees. I worked for Just Harvest, the local anti-hunger program that helped my family, as the Co-Director for Policy and Communications. I

am married today with a wonderful, supportive husband and three healthy children; Nathan 12; Christian 8; and Tatum 4. My husband is working and I am currently a law student in Ohio. Through the help of Stafford Loans, I plan to graduate in 2015.

I do not like thinking about those earlier days. For the longest time I would not tell anyone that I went hungry or that I received SNAP benefits. I was scared I would be judged. However, I did tell Nathan about those tough times and he cried. When I told him that I did not eat to ensure he would not go without, he hugged me and said "I would have shared my food, mama." I smiled and reassured him that I made that decision and he was only two years old at the time. I asked him if I could share our story. He nodded his head and said, "No mama should ever go hungry." He reminded me that I needed to help others because so many people helped us when times were tough.

I know that my experiences of hunger and poverty are not unique. There are many families – all kinds of families and individuals – that fall on tough times and rely on SNAP to put food on the table. SNAP helps families every day.

I am very thankful that it was there for us. I urge the Committee and the Congress to take stories like mine into account as you put together your budget. I ask that Congress continue to invest in life-saving programs so that families like mine all across the country can get the support they need to get back on their feet, back on track, and back into a job. They were there for me when I needed it most, and they shouldn't be cut now when so many others are struggling in this tough economy. I am here to keep my promise to Nathan. I am asking you to fund SNAP – and protect it from cuts – so that no other mama goes hungry. And, of course, it is not just mamas, but children and dads and grandparents. I am asking you to protect these federal programs so that no child in America has to sit at an empty table at dinner time.

On behalf of my family and others similarly situated, I thank you for your time and consideration.