



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

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Making Sure DC Residents Don't Go Hungry

By Wes Rivers

Federal nutrition programs help low-income residents have the healthy diets they need to succeed, but improvements to these programs are needed, along with policies that address the root economic causes of hunger. To address hunger in DC, the city and its federal partners should work together to boost nutrition benefits to help residents keep up with the cost of living in DC, but also invest in programs like affordable housing and job training to improve household stability.

Yesterday, DCFPI testified before the National Commission on Hunger on the importance of federal nutrition programs, like SNAP, in helping residents stay fed and economically stable. SNAP, formerly called food stamps, serves more than 140,000 residents or 20 percent of DC's population and is responsible for lifting 14,000 residents out of poverty since the recession.

Likewise, 91 percent of District schools are "community eligible" for free and reduced price lunch through the National School Lunch Program – meaning that because 40 percent or more of the students are eligible, all students can receive free breakfast and lunch. These programs, along with federal nutrition education programs help ensure that kids have a healthy diet and enter school ready to learn – boosting academic achievement and ability to seize other economic opportunities later in life.



Source: Harriet Worobev. Rutgers

That's why it is so important that our federal partners look to increase benefits, especially SNAP. Higher benefit levels will improve District residents' ability to purchase healthy foods throughout the month and give them flexibility in purchasing healthy and locally sourced options. Higher benefits will help more residents navigate the high costs of living in DC, freeing up money for housing and transportation, and will lift more residents out of poverty.

However, nutrition benefits alone cannot solve hunger in DC. The District must look at the root causes of hunger like unemployment, low-wages, and unaffordable housing. Over the last decade, average income for the poorest 40 percent of DC residents has been flat. Many low-skilled workers still face [unemployment](#) or underemployment. Yet rents have increased steadily in a booming housing market. [Low-cost housing in the private market has virtually disappeared](#), and as a result, 64 percent of low-income renters spend more than half of their income on rent.

Not surprisingly, when families face high housing costs, they are forced to cut back on other necessities, including food. A study by the Joint Center for Housing Studies showed that low-income families with severe affordable housing cost burdens spent \$160 a month less on food than low-income households that do not face severe housing burdens. This suggests high housing costs make it even harder for families to get enough nutritious food.

As a community, we must address economic determinants of hunger in conjunction with improving national nutrition programs. DC has already made strides, like increasing the minimum wage to \$11.50 (to be fully implemented in 2016) and putting \$100 million towards affordable housing production, but there is more than can be done.

To read the full testimony, [click here](#).