

Statement of John Weidman, Deputy Executive Director of The Food Trust
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture
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Thank you Chairman Conaway and Ranking Member Peterson for inviting me to testify. My name is John Weidman, and I am the Deputy Executive Director of The Food Trust, a Pennsylvania based nonprofit that works nationally to improve access to affordable nutritious food. We were founded in 1992, and 2017 marks our 25th Anniversary. This year, through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation we have launched the Center for Healthy Food Access: a national collaborative effort aimed at improving the health of children in America. I am here today to talk about the strategies that The Food Trust has been employing to improve health and encourage healthy eating among SNAP participants. We believe that to have the greatest impact it takes a comprehensive approach that includes improving access, providing nutrition education, and utilizing SNAP incentives. In Pennsylvania, we have been improving access by opening and maintaining farmers markets in low-income neighborhoods, working with small food stores to stock healthier products, and incentivizing new supermarket development through the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, the national model for Healthy Food Financing programs. Our team of dietitians and nutrition educators is providing innovative and engaging programming through the SNAP-Ed program to teach children and adults how to eat healthy, how to cook, and how to shop on a budget. And we run a successful Food Bucks program that provides \$2 worth of free fruits and vegetables for every \$5 spent with SNAP at Philadelphia farmers markets and a local supermarket chain.

Based on research that has been conducted in Philadelphia, this comprehensive approach is working. A peer-reviewed study published in the journal *Pediatrics* found that our SNAP-Ed funded school nutrition education program reduced childhood overweight by 50%.¹ More recently, data collected on the Body Mass Index (BMI) of Philadelphia children is showing that after decades of rising childhood obesity rates, we are finally seeing them drop.² The strategies that are being implemented in Pennsylvania— access to healthy food, nutrition education, and SNAP Incentives— are happening all around the country, and they are not only changing eating habits and preventing diet-related diseases like heart disease and diabetes, but they are also creating jobs and spurring economic development in struggling urban and rural communities.

I want to share a brief story about Nicole Speller, a participant in one of our free six-week SNAP-Ed cooking workshops that take place in over 500 community sites: libraries, community centers, and churches across Southeastern Pennsylvania. Nicole had decided to make a change and improve her health. She also happened to be a fantastic cook, and each week she would share the recipes and

¹ Foster, GD, Sherman, S, Borradaile, KE, Grundy, KM, Veur, SS, Nachmani, J, Karpyn, A, Kumanyika, S, Shults, J. (2008). A Policy-Based School Intervention to Prevent Overweight and Obesity. *Pediatrics*, 121(4). doi:10.1542/peds.2007-1365

² Robbins, JM, Mallya G, Wagner A, Buehler JW. Prevalence, Disparities, and Trends in Obesity and Severe Obesity Among Students in the School District of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2006-2013. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2015;12;150185. DOI; <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd12.150185>.

nutrition tips she was learning with her neighbors and her church group. Upon completing the workshop series, Nicole started her own healthy cooking class at her church. This is just one example of how SNAP-Ed is helping to create a culture of health, and it is happening in innovative ways in every state in the nation. In addition to our cooking workshops, we also use Share Our Strength's excellent Cooking Matters program to teach how to shop healthy in the supermarket and make healthy choices on a budget. We also work directly with thousands of school children each year to teach them about food, farming, and eating healthy.

Of course, understanding how to eat healthier is only part of the problem for many SNAP participants. Accessing healthy food continues to be a challenge for millions of Americans. Over the last decade, we have seen incredible success through public-private partnerships to incentivize grocery stores, farmers markets, and other healthy food retail solutions to meet the need for better access. In Pennsylvania, thanks in large part to now-Congressman Dwight Evans, our Fresh Food Financing Initiative funded 88 grocery store projects in urban and rural areas and created 5,000 jobs. Based on this successful model, we now have the federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) and programs in New York, Illinois, Mississippi, Colorado, and other states. Most recently, through Governor Kasich's Ohio Fresh Food Program, Vinton County— a rural county in southeast Ohio— is now slated for a new grocery store to open after the only store in the county had previously closed. This store will now serve seniors and working families who have been unable to satisfy the very basic human need of going to the store to buy food.

While the HFFI model was developed working directly with grocers who want to improve access in underserved areas, they also stress the importance of nutrition education. It makes sense: if grocers open a store and stock it with fresh produce, they need nutrition education programs to drive demand for purchasing healthy food. For this reason, some grocers are now hiring registered dietitians to guide consumers in the store. Grocers understand the need to improve eating habits, but at the end of the day they cannot stock food that does not sell. This is why both access and education go hand-in-hand, not only to drive better health outcomes, but also to ensure that stores are profitable and serve as economic anchors for small towns and urban neighborhoods.

In addition to the vital role the federal government plays, partnerships with the private sector are a critical component of the solution. Consumer demand for healthy products is growing, and many operators and manufacturers are shifting their product portfolios in a healthier direction. At the same time, retailers are developing innovative ways to sell these products. Grocers, bodega owners, and farmers have been indispensable partners in all of the efforts I have been discussing. We are partnering with food manufacturers such as Campbell Soup Company, which is spearheading a 10-year initiative in Camden, New Jersey, to improve health and reduce food insecurity. GSK (GlaxoSmithKline), another corporate partner, is funding a city-wide initiative called Get HYPE Philly! that is focused on youth leadership development, healthy eating and exercise, and education and job skills. We need more of these innovative partnerships in the years ahead.

Lastly, I want to discuss incentives that encourage SNAP participants to try healthier foods and that make healthier choices more affordable. As I mentioned, The Food Trust launched our Philly Food Bucks

program in 2011, and it has been a huge success. Seventy-three percent of Philly Food Bucks users report eating more fruits and vegetables, and SNAP sales at farmers markets have increased 300% since the start of the program. Based in Michigan, the Fair Food Network has greatly expanded their Double Up Food Bucks program in farmers' markets and grocery stores across the country. Wholesome Wave, based in Connecticut, is bringing SNAP incentives to health care, allowing physicians to "prescribe" fruits and vegetables to low-income patients for redemption at local farmers markets. In 2014, USDA launched FINI, the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive program, which has supported research, piloting, and expansion of SNAP incentive programs. Making healthier food more affordable makes it easier for low-income families to take risks when trying new foods. Many parents might try putting a plate of fresh carrots and peas in front of a toddler. If he sticks out his tongue and says yuck, they can just fix him something else to eat. (This is based on personal experience. I have a 3 year-old). But imagine if you only have enough money to afford one plate of food— the decision to try new things becomes much more difficult.

In closing, there is no silver bullet to prevent diet-related diseases like obesity and diabetes, but the costs are real. A recent study by the Milken Institute calculated the direct medical costs for diet-related disease in 2014 at \$427.8 billion.³ Soda and sugary drinks are a big driver of the problem and Congress has moved forward to address obesity and diabetes through innovative programs like SNAP-Ed, FINI and HFFI. A comprehensive approach that combines access, nutrition education, and SNAP incentives holds the most promise for stemming these rising healthcare costs and building new, healthier habits. SNAP is the foundation of this comprehensive approach. It keeps millions of families from going hungry and is a critical economic pillar for lower income urban and rural communities. Without SNAP, stores would close, jobs would be lost, more families would drop into poverty, and more people would need food stamps. A vicious cycle, if there ever was one. By expanding access to healthy food, nutrition education, and incentives in the next Farm Bill we can improve health, increase revenues for American farmers, create jobs in urban and rural areas, and control rising healthcare costs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, I look forward to your questions.

³ Waters, H., & DeVol, R. (2016). Weighing Down America: The Health and Economic Impact of Obesity. Retrieved from Milken Institute: <http://assets1c.milkeninstitute.org/assets/Publication/ResearchReport/PDF/Weighing-Down-America-WEB.pdf>