

**U.S. House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Nutrition
Hearing on The Future of SNAP**

Testimony of Josh Protas
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MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
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Distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Nutrition and Committee on Agriculture, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

I'm pleased to be able to share the perspectives about the SNAP program on behalf of MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national nonprofit organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the US and Israel.

In Jewish tradition—and across all faith traditions—there is a fundamental value of taking care of the most vulnerable among us. In Leviticus, we are commanded to leave the corners of our fields and the gleanings of our harvest and vineyards for the poor and the stranger. This commandment is a clear expression of our collective responsibility for each other. Its wisdom respects the dignity of those who are poor and gives them a role in taking care of their needs by harvesting the corners of the fields themselves. We are not to judge those who are poor, nor should we assume to know the circumstances of their lives.

In our country today, we are blessed to have a national program that manifests these traditional values and works effectively to provide assistance to the millions of people who struggle with food insecurity. This program respects the dignity of those who experience hunger and poverty, responds when the needs increase, supports work, promotes long-term health and well-being, contributes to our economy, and provides vital assistance to the most vulnerable in our society. Of course, this program is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—SNAP.

SNAP is not the only assistance that is available, but it is the most essential. The problem of food insecurity is profound and complex, with responses coming from both government programs and from charitable and faith community organizations.

The charitable sector provides important short-term assistance through an array of food pantries, food banks, and houses of worship, but this assistance is inherently insufficient to address the systemic problem of hunger or feed the significant and persistent number of people who need help. While there are those who argue that charity alone can address food insecurity, the massive scale of this problem and the realities of the charitable sector demonstrate just how impossible that is. Many of these agencies are small operations open only a few days a week and for a few hours each day. They are often run by volunteers out of basements or closets at their local houses of worship, and they primarily distribute food that has been donated from within their communities.

Charities cannot sufficiently fill the gaps created by the erosion of government programs. The budget of the largest food charity is a mere fraction of the federal response to food insecurity. Only the federal government has the capacity to solve an issue of hunger's magnitude. It is essential that SNAP and other government nutrition safety net programs are operated with the utmost effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability, and the USDA works diligently to ensure this is the case.

SNAP is a highly effective anti-poverty program that assists tens of millions of Americans who struggle with food insecurity. The program responded to the increased needs during the Great Recession as it was designed to do, and program participation is dropping now as employment rates and economic conditions have improved.

Can SNAP be improved? Of course. But dismantling the structure of the program is not an improvement, and transforming SNAP into a block grant program threatens its impact and responsiveness.

Studies have shown us a great deal about the success of SNAP and where its limitations have kept it from living up to its promise. But nothing speaks louder to the truth of SNAP than the voices of those affected by hunger. MAZON commissioned photojournalist Barbara Grover to collect stories across the country from people who have experienced the painful reality of food insecurity. These stories are featured in *This Is Hunger*, a multimedia exhibition that is currently traveling to communities on the East Coast. One consistent refrain from people interviewed is that their SNAP benefits routinely didn't last until the end of the month, forcing their families to take desperate measures to make ends meet. Another is how people confronted

with a meager budget for food often resort to purchasing cheap and unhealthy products to fill them up, giving up fresh and more nutritious choices.

We recommend that Congress change the SNAP benefit calculation to correlate with the USDA Low Cost Food Plan in order to provide a more appropriate level of assistance and empower food insecure families to better meet their nutritional needs.

Too many able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) have recently found themselves cut off from SNAP benefits after the re-imposition of the three-month time limit. Who are these ABAWDs? They are 60,000 veterans. They are single parents of children over the age of 18. They are homeless individuals and ex-offenders who struggle to find employment. They are residents of states where the economic recovery has failed to materialize. They are 19 year-olds who have just aged out of foster care and have no family on whom to rely. Re-imposing time limits seems cruel and misplaced when too little is being done to ensure that these SNAP recipients have access to good paying job opportunities and available job training slots. SNAP Employment and Training programs can offer innovative and effective means to transition people back to work, as the new E & T pilot programs called for in the last Farm Bill are demonstrating.

We recommend that such employment and training initiatives be robustly funded, made more widely accessible, and set up with reasonable parameters, including individualized case management. It is critical that these are voluntary programs that build people up rather than mandatory sanction-based programs that penalize individuals.

As a country, we must do more to encourage workforce participation and pathways out of poverty, which must include support for affordable and accessible childcare, expansion of tax credits, and living wages.

We also recommend more support for innovative strategies to promote healthier eating among SNAP recipients, including building on the success of programs such as the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive grant program and the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which contribute to notable increases in the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.

More needs to be done to connect underserved populations with helpful assistance from SNAP. High rates of food insecurity among seniors, veterans,

Native Americans, college students, and LGBT individuals are concerning and more must be done to increase SNAP participation for these groups.

We recommend additional outreach and education efforts to make individuals in these and other underserved populations aware of the assistance available to them through SNAP and remove the barriers that prevent them from accessing it. MAZON's work reveals that stigma associated with SNAP is among the biggest barriers to participation. We regularly encounter misinformation about the program that makes older Americans reluctant to participate. Similarly, MAZON's efforts to remove barriers to access SNAP for food insecure military families reveals significant negative associations with the program that exacerbate shame and stigma, making it more difficult for those who are struggling to seek out help. On this topic, I would like to express MAZON's sincere appreciation to Chairman Thompson and Ranking Member McGovern for their co-sponsorship of the Military Hunger Prevention Act, which was recently introduced by Representative Susan Davis and would remove an unintentional barrier to SNAP access for currently serving military families in need.

Too much rhetoric has been focused on criticizing the SNAP program and impugning the character of SNAP recipients. The perpetuation of myths and negative stereotypes of SNAP participants in the media and by public officials is damaging to the program, hurts efforts to expand access to people who are struggling, and makes it more difficult to achieving the larger goal of ending hunger. The energies of the House Committee on Agriculture would be better spent supporting and cooperating with USDA to further reduce error rates and ensure that SNAP is reaching and serving a greater proportion of those who need assistance.

In conclusion, I would simply and vehemently state that SNAP works. While there are certainly opportunities to make particular program improvements, including increasing benefit levels and expanding program access, the fundamental structure of SNAP as an entitlement program is solid and should not be undermined. Instead, robust and targeted investments to strengthen program features should be considered.

Along with my written testimony, I have shared just a few stories of people impacted by SNAP who are featured in MAZON's traveling multimedia exhibition *This Is Hunger*. I encourage you to read these personal reflections and keep in mind the real people this program helps. Thank you.

Dylan from Commerce, Georgia

"It was the best time, when my mom had a job. I actually enjoyed life. I used to get to do whatever. Now, I get up in the morning and put on my shoes like anybody else, but when I get to school, I think about losing our house.



My mom got laid off four years ago from her job at the school district. It really gets to me, it really does, that they let her go. She'd been there 20 years and is more qualified than a lot of teachers, but it seems that getting full time work around here is all political now. The only work my mom can get these days is substitute teaching. It's part time and not enough to pay for the basics. The fact that my 84-year-old grandpa is keeping us from losing our house, pretty much gets to me. Before I go to bed at night, I actually pray that we won't.

I have a lot of weight on my shoulders for a 14-year-old. I can't stand our situation. I've had to sacrifice a lot since my mom lost her job. I'm actually wearing my mom's pants right now because we can't afford to buy me clothes. I can't take the college classes I qualified for because we can't afford them. My mom doesn't know it, but I quit baseball so she wouldn't have to spend money on my uniform. It's not a good feeling when you're sitting in the house eating chips and potted meat as your friends are off playing ball and going to steakhouses when they win. It's not a good feeling at all.

Our food stamps have gone from \$300 to \$200 a month for my mom and me. We're not able to afford healthy foods that some people can. It's usually chips, bologna sandwiches and all that. We've had to open up canned foods from the pantry that's probably older than me. Eating like this and knowing that your friends are eating regular food makes me feel like I'm not normal. We run out of food some months and I go to bed hungry. I've gone days without sleep because of hunger. The next day, I'll go through class pinching myself, doing stuff to stay awake.

Being hungry affects your appearance, how you act. When I'm hungry, I'm not in the mood for anything. I'm depressed. Then, my mom picks me up and I continue to work as hard as I can in school. I've wanted to become a surgeon since the fourth grade. I keep reminding myself that if I work hard in life, I can get to where I'm fine. Then I can buy my mom a new house.

It's not fair that we have to go through this. It's not fair for anybody to have to go through this. You shouldn't have to worry about where your next meal is gonna come from - especially people with kids."

To read more stories of people who struggle with food insecurity, visit thisishunger.org/stories.

THIS IS HUNGER
A community engagement program of Mazon | A Jewish Response to Hunger

Mollie from New Orleans, Louisiana

"I used to have big money, the good income. I'd take friends out to dinner and travel – to London and Scotland. If I saw a collectible online I wanted, I'd buy it. I could not have perceived in a million years that I would ever be unemployed and kicked out of my apartment. Then, the recession hit and by 2012, my successful New England tour company was making one-fifth the income it did the year before. I'm a single woman so I decided to cut my losses, sell the business, and move back to New Orleans. That's the place that feels like home to me.



I did everything to find work and applied for countless jobs. But I was either over-qualified or rejected because of my age. After nine months, my savings ran out. I became late in my rent and couldn't pay my utilities. I had to sell everything I owned – my car, art, CDs, antiques – to have cash to live on. I was evicted from my apartment with nowhere to go. I figured I could live on the streets, but not my dog. I gave him to an Akita rescue organization, but that broke my heart since he was the only thing left from my past. Four days later I followed him to Thibidoux, Louisiana – a place I'd never heard of before.

Not long after I got here, I saw a long line of people in front of a building. I was curious what they were doing, what was in the boxes they were getting. That's how I found out about the food pantry. Before that, I had never heard of food pantries. Since then, I've been going to Good Samaritan Food Bank whenever I can. Although you don't get to pick and choose what you want, it's good because they include things you can't buy with food stamps – like toiletries and paper products.

These days, I'm eating pretty low level, just canned goods like Vienna sausage, spinach, peaches, because \$200 in food stamps is just not enough for one adult. I drink a lot of water to help prevent hunger. I can't afford fresh food. I only eat lunch and dinner and have only coffee for breakfast. When my food stamps run out, it's kinda scary not knowing if I'm gonna have any money to eat tomorrow. Every time I go to the grocery store I look my receipt and say, "O.K., how much do I have until the sixth of next month when I get my food stamps again?" I'm worrying all the time, trying to save myself here. I'm thinking: I've got so much to give, a lot of experience. I ask myself, "What can I do next? What haven't I tried?" So I pray, take a nap, re-strategize, and pick myself up.

I've had moments of being embarrassed and on the verge of tears because I don't understand why I can't control any of this. But when I eat, I feel refreshed, and that maybe things will get better. They have a bit. I'm working part time at a retail big box store. I make \$8, which comes to \$800 a month. I'm living in a run-down trailer, but at least it's with my dog. I'm hoping to get full time work, so I can afford to move us to a better place. I don't know if I'll ever make the money that I did up north, but I hope I can move back to New Orleans someday. New Orleans has always been a happy place to me."

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Belinda from Thibidoux, Louisiana

"One afternoon, my brother was backing out his car and didn't see my daughter. He ran over her. They told me that she was gonna die within the first 45 minutes of the accident. That was in 2004. But here we are in 2013, and she's still alive.



My normal child was left in a wheel chair with traumatic brain injury and a tracheostomy. Six months later, my mom got diagnosed with cancer. Then Katrina hit and I lost my mobile home and some family members. Then my parents died, one after another. My life has changed dramatically over the past decade. To get through it, I just keep my priorities are straight - to make sure my kids have the best education, clothes on their backs and food on the table.

Before this, I made really good pay in nursing. I was able to take care of my three daughters and help out my parents. But the first year after the accident, we never knew what was going to happen and I had to resign from my job to be by my daughter's bedside. When I tried to go back to work, the recession had hit Louisiana and all they'd give me was work on an as-needed basis. The thing that's so confusing is that everyday I apply for these jobs in the newspaper, and I don't get any calls back.

I'm a single mom and my only steady income since the accident is a little less than \$2000 a month in government assistance. My mortgage alone is \$1000 a month and paying that is my first priority because I'm not gonna have my kids on the street. I need car insurance to get my daughter to all her doctors appointments. She can't miss 'em. And I have to pay the lights and water. All that's left for groceries is between \$150 and \$300 a month. That's not enough to feed growing children. When I make a little extra cash house cleaning or doing private nursing, I go straight to the grocery store to buy food.

I applied for food stamps but was told my income was too much. If I got food stamps, that would change our lives a lot. I would buy stuff with vitamins in it, like fresh fruit and vegetables, instead of the canned vegetables like spinach, corn, and baked beans that I can afford. I am a parent that wants my kids to eat healthy food - stuff that's gonna promote their growth and won't make them sick - but I'm havin' to fry everything because that fills my kids up and stretches the quantity versus giving them quality food. It makes me feel bad that I have to say "no" to them, but I have to get them to understand that we don't have enough food to share when their friends come over. That's hard because I was raised to share everything we have.

I've made sacrifices to make sure that my kids don't starve. I'll go without eating to make sure they can. I done sold radios, my TV, even furniture to buy food. There are times when my kids wake up durin' the night and they're hungry. I try to figure out if there's somethin' in the house to give them, like the snacks that I get at the food pantry, so they can go back to sleep. The food pantry is a blessing. I'm just grateful that I can rely it, but I feel degraded to go there because I don't wanna be dependent on nobody for nothing. But the upside is I know my kids are gonna have food to eat if I go there.

I'd do whatever I had to do to make sure that my kids have. I try to make the best out of every day. After all, one minute you can be up and another minute you can be down."

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Ashley from San Diego, California

"My husband's an E4 Petty Officer on a warship. When he joined the Navy, I didn't think it was going to be all sunsets and roses, but I didn't expect that we'd have to eat Ramen 7 nights a week because that's what we could afford. We thought being in the military might be a way out of living from paycheck to paycheck, but you know, a full time clerk at taco bell makes more than my husband. It's frustrating that he risks his life to keep us safe from terrorism, and misses holidays and birthdays, and he doesn't get paid enough to feed the family the way he'd like with healthy, fresh food.



When we found out my husband was being transferred to San Diego we thought for sure he'd get a cost of living allowance on top of his paycheck. They're given in Hawaii and other expensive places, so we thought we'd definitely get it here. But there is no COLA for San Diego so that makes living here really hard. We're not alone.

I'm shocked that so many military families are standing in line at the food pantry because they really need help. Many of us struggle for months before finding out that there are services for us, and then it's pretty much word of mouth. I don't know a whole lot about FSSA, but I looked into food stamps and it seemed like we made \$100 a month too much. Food stamps considers our housing allowance as income, even though we don't see a penny of it, but my daughter qualifies for free breakfast and lunch at school because our income is so low. I understand how base pay, hazard pay, and family separation pay should be considered income, but not the BAH. If that were changed, it would help families like us tremendously because then we'd qualify for food stamps and I could feed my family healthier food instead from a box.

My husband's base pay is so low that we are barely getting by. We have to juggle our finances. We've given up cable and going to the movies. The first place I cut is food because the consequences are too great if I don't pay the car insurance or have gas money so my husband can get to work. I try to put away \$50 a month for emergencies. I go to the food pantry because every bit helps. Some people would say it's wrong to use the food pantry if I can save something, but if I was forced to choose, I'd rather put that little bit into savings, as opposed to using it to buy a small bag of extra groceries, so we'd have money if we need to visit a sick parent or something.

I was so embarrassed at first to go the food pantry because I grew up with everything I needed. But I'd rather be embarrassed and be able to feed my family at least one extra meal a week and buy a bit of fresh food. It's nice to be able to have my daughter say, "I'd like a snack" and be able to give her an apple instead of chips, because when she eats healthy, she isn't lethargic. It makes me so sad that my daughter is 6 and I have to tell her "no" sometimes. But on the other hand, I would rather grow up understanding that things costs money.

I looked for a job, but it wasn't worth it. We'd be negative 400 or 500 dollars a month after paying for daycare and what would I do when my husband is deployed? My daughter needs one parent around if she gets sick or needs help with school. Like all military kids, she already gives up a lot."

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Cheryl from Tuba City, Arizona

“Even though we never married, I never thought my boyfriend and I would separate. We had it made – we had five kids, a nice apartment in Flagstaff, our own washer/dryer, we ate out all the time. But at the height of the recession, the place he worked at went out of business. He tried to go out on his own, but he struggled. One day, he just didn’t come home after work. I was pregnant then with our youngest, and to this day she hasn’t met her father yet.



After that, I moved my family to the Navajo reservation where I grew up. I got the piece of land that was my tribal right and put a small RV on it. Right now, my only means of supporting my family is a bit of child support, food stamps and WIC, which give me milk, cheese, bread and cereal for my youngest kids.

I really want to work, but the jobs I could get won’t pay enough for me to afford daycare for the two who aren’t in school yet. I can’t afford to hook up the water or electricity, so we’re living without power. I can’t afford to feed the kids like I want – like they ate before. I never know when or how much child support is coming in, so I have to put aside a little money each month for times when a kid gets sick and I’ll need to buy cough syrup or something. It’s hard to live like this, but we do it. We’re a tight family.

We live mostly on ramen, potatoes and Hamburger Helper and whatever we get in the boxes from the food pantry. I am pretty good at budgeting and making things stretch, but food is very expensive on the reservation and my food stamps last for only two weeks. When my food stamps come in, it’s like Christmas for the kids because they get the foods they’ve been waiting for – the things they’ve written down on a list for me, like strawberries and apples. Sometimes the kids say, “mom I’m hungry,” and “my friends eat better than we do,” but I tell them this is what we have. I think they understand what’s going on because when they see the food running low, they hide some of what they’re given in school and bring it home to eat later. It makes me feel so sad inside that I can’t give my kids all that they want, but I don’t let them see it. I try to make it up to them by getting them a pizza once in a while.

I never thought I’d live in an RV, or have to chop wood for heat, or shower outdoors with buckets. I thought I’d always be able to provide for my kids. At least we’re not bouncing around like some families. At least we have a place we can call home.”

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Charles from Haman, Louisiana

"My whole family was truck drivers, so it was in the blood for me to be a truck driver. I hauled government jeeps and guns all over the country. I just loved my job - going to different states and Canada. I had a stroke nine years ago, at 62, and it shut all that down. I wasn't about ready to retire, but the stroke kept me from working. I'm wheelchair-bound now.



I never imagined I'd get to this age and this would be my life. Living on low income you learn how to stretch your money. It was hard at first because before the stroke, things were good. My family used to go out to eat, to ball games and just had fun - invite people over for a fish fry. But now, life's a struggle. My only income is \$1200 a month from Disability. I live in low-income senior housing and get Medicare, but after the monthly bills, I can't cover everything else I need.

I can only really afford to go to one doctor appointment a month, but that just ain't enough. I try to have more

money to spend on the doctor by putting more blankets on the bed at night instead of using the heat, but I still don't save enough for all the appointments I need to treat my diabetes and a heart condition. It makes me feel terrible that I can't afford to take care of my health. After my medical, I'm only left with about \$160, plus \$17 in food stamps, to spend a month on food. I used to eat grits, eggs, steaks and stuff like that, but since the stroke, I don't buy what I want to eat, but what I can afford to eat - mostly beans and lunchmeat, or something to make a sandwich with. I'm supposed to be on a special diabetes diet, but I just can't afford to buy that food. There are times towards the end of the month when all I can afford to eat for days at a time is bread and milk. I don't like it, but milk and bread kills the hunger a bit. When you're hungry and your stomach's growling, I tell yah, it really don't feel good. Getting the commodities once a month from the food pantry helps, but if I could get \$40 or \$50 in food stamps, I could feed myself.

Where I live, we are low-income people and we don't have money to buy everything we need, so we share. Sometimes the girls over in the other quarter cook turkey neck bone, or something like that, and they bring it over here. I've realized that's how we're surviving, by sharing.

My wife is dead and kids are adults now. They're struggling too. What really hurts me is when my daughter calls and asks for \$25-\$30 to get her hair cut and I says "baby if I had it, I'd give it to you." She's in college and I don't have nothing to give her right now and that's the hardest thing for me."

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