



Testimony of Joseph Nader

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Good afternoon. Chairwoman Walorski, Ranking Member McGovern, and members of the Committee. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to share my experience and views on the importance of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or what my family used to call “food stamps.” I am the Executive Chef for Levy Restaurants and The National Football League’s Detroit Lions. I am also a volunteer Chef with Cooking Matters, a program that teaches nutrition education and basic cooking skills to low-income families in the Detroit area. Cooking Matters works as a public-private partnership, leveraging both SNAP Ed funds to community organizations and private funding from companies like Walmart.

As a child, there were times when things got very tough for my family, as it did for many families that worked in and around the auto industry in Detroit in the 1970’s and 1980’s. There is nothing more vital to the success of a child than proper nutrition. During these tough times, we would rely on support from programs like food stamps, free school lunch and the like. It wasn’t always a long term need, but there were many times that support was needed, for a brief period. I feel very strongly that my success in life and my career is directly correlated with the fact that I had nutrition assistance early in my life. I experienced firsthand how SNAP and the school lunch program worked together to make sure I had the healthy food I needed both at home and at school.

I think one of the biggest misconceptions about SNAP is that families are on it for life. It is most often a temporary lifeline, as it was for my family. Families on SNAP are presented with very hard decisions when balancing budgets from rent to child care and basic needs such as nutrition.

While I received free school lunch, my school didn’t offer school breakfast. This made SNAP even more important to my family. I saw many of my friends who were coming to school hungry get stigmatized and labeled as having behavioral problems, which may be alleviated by daily, nutritious breakfast and lunch. We now have research that supports what happened in my

classroom. A study by Share Our Strength and Deloitte found that students who eat school breakfast score up to 17.5 percent higher on math tests, miss fewer days of school, and are more likely to graduate.¹

I have also personally experienced the stigmatization of being from a low-income family. Childhood hunger, and food insecurity crosses many demographics and socio-economic areas. It is urban, suburban and rural...hunger is the face of many Americans.

As I look back, I realize the fact that my family had the cooking skills in place to stretch the few dollars that we had for food and were able to maximize our SNAP benefits. This was a driving force for getting personally involved in helping others today. I discovered Share our Strength's Cooking Matters program, operating at Gleaners Community Food Bank in Detroit, about three years ago. I was delighted to see a program that teaches low income families nutrition education and basic cooking skills. It made me think of how many of my friends' families growing up could have benefited, and subsequently maximized their very modest food budgets. They could have been empowered to shop smarter and cook healthier meals on tight budgets.

Cooking Matters ensures that families have the knowledge to use their SNAP dollars efficiently. After taking the course, families are more likely to buy whole grains and more fruits and vegetables.²

I am very fortunate to work for Levy Restaurants and The Detroit Lions. They both are very active in our communities, and support the work that I do as part of Cooking Matters. We all believe that nothing is more important to child development than proper access to food and nutrition. We realize that SNAP is an effective way to give parents the power to feed their families when times get tough.

In Cooking Matters, I see families who get SNAP and school breakfast. Parents tell me SNAP works effectively when it works in tandem with other programs, like school meals because the SNAP benefits are simply not enough to feed a family for an entire month. To end childhood hunger in this nation, we need to ensure that children are successfully getting three healthy meals each day. School breakfast ensures that kids can start their days with a healthy meal to fuel their brains and help them focus on their lessons, rather than on a growling stomach. This allows these parents to stretch their SNAP dollars longer into the month instead of running out. This way, even when budgets are extremely tight, kids are getting the healthy food they need where they live and where they learn. In effect, these programs become different rungs on the ladder of economic mobility for children.

This is a matter of potential. When I look at a child who's struggling with hunger, I see a potential future doctor. I see a potential future computer coder. I see a potential future chef of the

¹ Deloitte and Share Our Strength. "Ending Childhood Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis." 2013.

² Altarum Institute. "Cooking Matters at the Store Evaluation." 2013.

Detroit Lions. But in order for that to happen, we must ensure our children are fed. SNAP can help these kids grow up to achieve these dreams.

I have taught many Cooking Matters courses throughout the last three years. I have seen the tears and the smiles on children's faces throughout the six week program. I have seen them get so excited to learn nutrition and cooking skills, and to share this information with their families. I have heard them tell me how much the program has changed their lives, and how they now make healthy decisions. I have also been delighted to have many of the kids tell me that after the Cooking Matters program they would like to go to culinary school and become chefs! Nutrition education alone can't solve the hunger crisis in America. We need to have strong programs like SNAP, WIC, and school meals to support families when they are going through hard times and nutrition education to make sure they are able to maximize those benefits.

For all of these reasons, I'm here to urge you to protect SNAP funding, as it is an effective way to give parents the power to feed their families when times get tough. I have lived this personally, and see it every day in my work in the Detroit community.

SNAP matters....Cooking Matters...Children Matter!

Thank you all so much for your time and attention to this very important issue.