



**Written Testimony Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Nutrition
Tuesday, March 21, 2017**

*“The Next Farm Bill:
Nutrition Distribution Programs”*

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Frank Kubik, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program Director at Focus: HOPE, a civil and human rights nonprofit organization in Detroit, Michigan. I also work with the National CSFP Association. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Focus: HOPE CSFP and its 41,000 monthly low-income senior participants in the metropolitan Detroit area, as well as the 600,000 monthly CSFP participants in 48 states, the District of Columbia, and two Indian Tribal Organizations.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) began in 1969 to supplement protein, calcium, iron, and vitamins A and C for low-income pregnant and post-partum mothers and children under the age of six. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) purchases nutrient-rich foods at wholesale prices to provide a nutritionally balanced monthly food package. Pilot programs in 1982 added seniors as eligible participants. In the Farm Bill of 2014, CSFP became an elderly only program. We thank the Subcommittee for the legislation that enables us to exclusively serve our vulnerable senior population.

CSFP is a discretionary program funded through annual appropriations. While it is authorized in the farm bill, it receives no mandatory money. As the issue of hunger among our elderly has grown, more and more states have become interested in CSFP. In 1999, CSFP was in 17 states, the District of Columbia, and 2 Indian Tribal Organizations. As a result of the work of interested states and local agencies, Congress has increased the funding to allow expansion into new states, and today CSFP is in 48 states, the District of Columbia and 2 Indian Tribal Organizations (Red Lake, Minnesota and Oglala Sioux, South Dakota). Each month 697,865 participants are authorized to receive a nutritionally balanced food box. The National CSFP Association is working with the 2 remaining non-CSFP states to submit their plans of operation to USDA and with the support of Congress they will be able to provide CSFP food packages to their low-income seniors in the near future.

CSFP is a unique program which brings together federal and state agencies, along with public and private entities. In FY 2016, CSFP provided services through more than 150 non-profit community and faith-based organizations at 1,800 locations across the country. State agencies provide administrative oversight and contract with local and faith-based organizations to warehouse and distribute food, certify eligibility, and provide nutrition education to participants.

These local organizations build broad collaboration among non-profits, health providers, and area agencies on aging to provide easy access to the program. These partnerships reach even homebound seniors in both rural and urban settings with vital nutrition and remains an important market for commodities supported under various farm programs.

The 2013 supplemental report by Ziliak and Gundersen for the National Foundation to End Senior Hunger: The State of Senior Hunger in America 2011: An Annual Report, demonstrated that seniors continue to face ever increasing food insecurity challenges despite the end of the recession. For example, recent data from USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS), Household Food Security in the United States in 2015, Table 2, shows that 2.9 million (8%) households with seniors age 65 and older experienced food insecurity while more than 1.2 million (9%) of households composed of seniors living alone experienced food insecurity.

A 2013 National CSFP Association survey showed that half of the seniors who responded reported that they lived alone with an average income of less than \$750 a month. One-half of respondents from two-person households reported an income under \$1,000 per month. Twenty-five percent were enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and 50% said that they ran out of food during the month. Seventy percent of senior respondents said that they choose between food and medicine.

Many national studies have indicated that malnourished elderly patients experience more medical complications, have longer hospital stays, and incur higher hospital costs than well-nourished elderly patients. It should come as no surprise that proper nutrition promotes good health, treats chronic disease, decreases hospital length of stay, and saves health care dollars. Studies indicate that seniors are our fastest rising group of hungry in this country. Programs like CSFP can make a difference in fighting hunger among our elderly.

I have been with Focus: HOPE's CSFP since 1981. We provide CSFP food packages to 41,000 senior citizens each month and distribute over 700 tons of food annually. We have four primary distribution centers in our four county service areas, but we also work with almost 300 volunteer distribution agencies as well as individual volunteers to reach those seniors who are unable to make it to our food centers. Community outreach such as this allows us to reach many seniors who would be unable to access the CSFP program and receive the nutritional assistance that they need to maintain their independence and a healthier lifestyle, thus lowering the need for assisted living and increased medical care.

Unfortunately, many of our senior citizens find themselves struggling to make ends meet. Low-income seniors living on fixed incomes are facing an increasingly difficult time making their limited resources stretch to meet all of their daily needs, particularly with getting enough food to eat. They are making daily choices between whether to eat, buy medication, or pay their utility bills because their severely limited income does not allow them to adequately provide for themselves. The average income for a senior on our program is under \$700 a month. Many of these individuals worked long and productive lives as cooks, maids, janitors, and other low wage jobs but did not have employers who paid into the social security system on their behalf. Still others find that the companies that they retired from are no longer in business and the pensions that they thought would be there for retirement no longer exist. Many of our seniors are forced to



buy lower priced items at the supermarket, which by itself is difficult considering the food deserts that exists in cities like Detroit, items that are not as healthy for them as the higher priced items that are on the same shelves in the store. Fortunately, USDA has done an outstanding job in making the foods in CSFP healthier by lowering the sodium, sugar, and fat content and that goes a long way to keeping our seniors healthier and independent.

Frederick is a 92 year old World War II veteran and Tuskegee Airman. He honorably served his country, at a time of its greatest need. We are now honorably trying to serve him at a time of his greatest need. For the past 10 years Frederick and his wife have relied on their monthly CSFP food package that they have picked up at Focus: HOPE. Frederick has said, “For me and my wife, Focus: HOPE means food. It allows us to use our fixed income on other needs, like housing and medicine, and still eat at the end of the day.” Frederick did not enroll in CSFP until he was 82 years old. He only reached out to us when he had no other choice. He needed help and fortunately we were able to provide him and his wife with a monthly food box. A year ago Frederick’s son passed away and recently his wife passed away as well. For many of us Frederick is a hero. We are privileged to be able to help him with CSFP and to be a family to him, especially for all that he has done for us and for our country.

My agency is fortunate that we partner with many others in our community to help our senior participants receive the food that they need. We are able to utilize businesses, schools, and other community volunteers to pack and deliver boxes. Many of the volunteers come in to build boxes for home deliveries and end up providing additional support for the seniors. We’ve had food drives, donations of gloves, and donations of hats and scarfs in the cold weather months, which are really important because so many seniors dial down their homes in the winter to keep from paying higher energy bills. Gloves, hats and scarfs are not always a given when you have a limited income. Volunteers have adopted low-income senior buildings and bought the seniors Christmas presents. One volunteer group bought fans for seniors living in an apartment building that didn’t provide air conditioning to everyone living there. We always encourage our volunteers to talk to the seniors. That visit is sometimes just as important as the food that they are delivering. It shows that someone cares about them and that they are not alone. It also helps the volunteers to understand what many low-income seniors in this country are going through. Not everyone has enough to eat or enough money to pay their medical bills and other daily living expenses. Not everyone has a reliable car or family and friends to take care of them.

Barbara’s story is a familiar one. Seniors who are forced to take care of someone else and in so many cases, grandchildren. Barbara has recently signed up for the first time to receive CSFP benefits. Her husband passed away suddenly. Barbara says, “At this time I’m at a point where I can’t afford to pay my medical bills, rent, utilities, and I have a mentally challenged adult son who needs medication as well as every day necessities.” Stretching your own resources to take care of yourself is challenging enough, adding someone else makes it almost impossible. CSFP sites offer referrals to other programs and many have connections with other agencies to provide additional help. As Barbara said to us, “After calling Focus: HOPE I was assured that they could help me immediately. Not only did they assist me with food, they treated me with respect and gave me resources to call for additional assistance. I don’t know if I could have made it through another day with my crisis. Thank you for understanding and listening to my concerns.” Providing food assistance, in many cases, is not enough. Many CSFP agencies network with

other help providers and can bring additional assistance to low-income seniors, but as Barbara said it's also understanding and listening to concerns. Too many seniors are by themselves and have no one to talk to. We stress how important it is for our staff to listen and be respectful to the seniors we interact with. Life is very difficult for too many of our seniors. Sometimes they just need to be able to tell somebody their story.

As I stated earlier, volunteers play a crucial role in our program. Volunteer services are increasing because we are able to partner with health organizations and others to bring additional help to our seniors. We have regular events at our sites such as blood pressure checks, cholesterol screenings, annual eye exams, seasonal flu shots, and mobile mammograms, as well as other screenings, which are increasing in our food centers. Income tax assistance and utility bill payment assistance is also being offered to our community, and we are working with our local food bank to provide additional food to our CSFP participants. However, without volunteers we would not be able to do our jobs and reach as many seniors in need that we do. Many seniors are unable to access the additional help that they may need. Reliable public transportation is still an issue in Detroit and needs much improvement. To make matters worse, there are those who prey on seniors in a number of ways. Safety concerns are always a reality for too many of our elderly people so they are often times trapped in their homes or apartments and can't get out. Our volunteers and staff do an incredible job reaching those seniors and bringing them the additional nutritional help they need.

Phyllis is another senior on our food program. Phyllis worked for low wages and took jobs that didn't always pay into social security. She needed work and sometimes those were the only jobs that she could find. Now, without a pension and a small social security check, she worries about how she will make it from day to day. Phyllis lives alone and has no one to help her. Phyllis says, "If Focus: HOPE would stop distributing food for seniors, I don't know what I would do for food. I can barely afford to pay my household bills, medical bills, property taxes, and car insurance. Once I pay my bills I have only a few dollars left to my name." Phyllis worked all of her life. She did everything right. Now she needs a helping hand. CSFP is a lifeline to so many seniors like her.

One of the blessings of doing the work that we do is meeting the seniors who are on CSFP and getting to know them. They don't complain, they don't blame anyone, they are just grateful that programs like CSFP exist. They don't like to ask for help and many times feel that they are taking something away from someone that needs it more than them. I delivered food each month for years to Annette who lived on Detroit's eastside. Annette was legally blind, she couldn't see much of anything, but, other than that, for the most part she was in pretty good health and was happy to stay in her home by herself. She always loved canned peaches and I would make sure that if we had them, she got them. By the time I last visited with her she was 92 and sharp as she had ever been. We would talk and she was always so grateful for the food and the visit, and the truth is I probably got more out of visiting her than she did. She would make you feel good about things no matter what was going on because she was so positive, but the reality was that she needed the CSFP food to get her through the month. Her family lived out of state so she truly was by herself, but she didn't let that keep her from being upbeat and happy to be alive. The reality is that when you get attached to seniors, you know the day is coming when things may not be so good for them. They may get sick, or worse, but you try not to think about that because we



are appreciative for what we have now. One day I called Annette to let her know that I was coming by to bring her monthly food box. Her phone was disconnected. I drove by her house and it was empty. In the 30 days since I last saw her something obviously had happened. I would like to believe that she came into a lot of money or that one of her relatives from out of state came and moved her out to a better situation, but I guess I'll never know. We grow close to the seniors that we meet and deliver food to and sometimes we don't know what happened to them, but we do it again and again because we know what a difference that box of CSFP food makes for them. We know that for a brief time they know someone cares for them and it makes their day that much brighter. This is the very least that we can do for our greatest generation.

The stories that I have described in this testimony are all too typical for many seniors in this country. The lack of access to high quality food, reliable public transportation, inadequate affordable health care, and too often unsafe neighborhoods collude to make the so-called golden years far less than golden. This is unconscionable for the most prosperous nation in the world. People who have worked all of their lives and have contributed so much to this nation are being neglected and left on their own at a time when they need help the most. Indeed, there is much left to be done to address the issues of hunger and poverty locally and nationally.

Working for others is an honor and a privilege. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of this subcommittee, for allowing us to do our part by your support of the Commodity Supplemental Food Program. We are deeply appreciative of you, and I know that the seniors who this program has impacted share my great appreciation for all that you have done and continue to do on their behalf. We ask for your continued support of CSFP and for the seniors and others who rely on the program for their most basic needs. Your commitment to this nation's most vulnerable seniors and the leadership that you have shown in this regard will never be forgotten.

On behalf of the nation's Commodity Supplemental Food Program Participants and volunteers nationwide, thank you for this opportunity to present testimony for the record.