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Rules Committee

Alluma's Statement on How Technology Can Help Combat the Poverty that Drives Hunger.

Good afternoon my name is Robert Phillips, I am President and CEO (Chief Excitement Officer) of Alluma, a non-profit social enterprise. Alluma is working to make access to help and support for the 100 million economically insecure people in the United States simple and easy by reimagining the way technology is used to advance race and economic equity. Over the last decade we have help connect over 25 million people (about the population of Texas) to public benefits at the county and state level.

Access to opportunity is not universal in the United States of America. Barriers to real opportunity exist at all levels and is a major reason hunger exists in our country today. These barriers extend to how people in our country can access the needed help and support that public benefits provides – to pay their bills, feed their family, get medical care. At Alluma, we see very clearly how obtaining this support is still an obstacle for many, thanks to a system that often ignores or does not care how people live – or does not believe that people who ask for help are as deserving as everyone else. It is a system that often treats people in need more like undeserving beggars than like people worthy of dignity and respect.

Consider just a few cases in point:

- Families who receive Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) – a program for pregnant women and women with newborns – are not allowed to use their food vouchers for online food purchases and delivery, a service that many of us take for granted and is especially crucial during this pandemic for families with young children. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires recipients to complete their food purchases in a store, in front of a cashier.

- Prior to the pandemic, most recipients of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other public benefits were needed to go to an agency's office to supply information, sign documents, or be interviewed. This required those who are living paycheck to paycheck must take unpaid time off from their jobs, and pay for childcare and transportation, to conduct activities that can be done virtually or waived when needed. This requirement was more challenging during the pandemic as recipients with compromised health were forced to leave home and take a bus or train instead of sheltering in place to stay safe. Although agencies were given temporary waivers to use telephonic signatures or telephone interviews during the pandemic, these changes have not yet been made mandatory of state agencies.

- Recipients of SNAP benefits often lose their benefits and must re-apply simply because they did not return their renewal form on time – a form that may have been sent to an old address. This is just one example of people being thrown out of the system for procedural reasons – costing the state more money – when it would make more sense to assume that the person's circumstances have not changed and should be given the benefit of the doubt absent information to the contrary.

- The patchwork of programs for nutrition assistance creates confusion and duplicate efforts resulting in eligible individuals not enrolling in programs they desperately need. For example, the application process and rules for the different nutrition programs alone – SNAP, WIC, free or reduced school

lunch- are different. However, each program requires much of the same information to qualify. A family who is eligible for all these programs must provide the same information multiple times often to different agencies and then must keep track of each program's rules of use and renewal of benefits which also varies. Accessing government help just for food is a significant challenge and then add the need to find help with other necessities like income, housing, or health.

Over the last 20+ years we have been engaged in creating the first digital public benefit application with an online signature; developing solutions that determine eligibility for multiple benefit programs with a single application; drafting Section 1561 of the Affordable Care Act, which determines the technology requirements for integrated eligibility and enrollment systems; and advocating for how data-sharing and cross-agency collaboration, which supports increased enrollment. Building on our work many have tried to address these barriers through increased use of technology.

- Client portals: States and counties have made information and services available to consumers through client web portals using:
  - Eligibility screening tools that promote cross-program enrollment by helping people learn they may qualify for programs that they may not otherwise have been aware of;
  - Multi-benefit online applications to guide people through dynamic questions to receive eligibility determinations for multiple programs; and
  - Self-service case management features that enable people to obtain information about and manage their benefits (such as updating case information) through a single point of contact.
- Eligibility systems and business rules engines (BREs): States and counties have enhanced integrated eligibility systems by programming rules for multiple health and human services programs into BREs. These efforts automate calculations and tasks to achieve significant efficiencies for states throughout the eligibility and enrollment process. They also dramatically shorten the eligibility determination process for consumers across a range of programs, in some cases allowing for real-time determinations.
- Call center technology: Advanced call center technologies have allowed states and counties to appropriately route calls to the staff with the skills and ability needed to address people's needs. These technologies have given states and counties the flexibility to make best use of both generalists who can address questions about all programs and specialists in particular programs or types of issues. They have also given states and counties the flexibility to route calls wherever workers are located, allowing for "virtual" call centers with more efficient allocation of staff resources.
- Electronic data matching: Using electronic data matching to verify eligibility factors can save people who apply for multiple programs from having to provide the same paper documents multiple times. Some states have implemented state hubs that combine data from multiple sources, making it easier for workers to access and process the information across programs as needed.
- Document imaging and management: States and counties are using document imaging and management systems to support streamlined processing of paper documents across multiple programs. These systems make it easier for multiple workers to be involved in a particular case as needed over time and across programs, easing handoffs among different programs or units of workers, such as call center representatives and workers in local eligibility offices.
- Data management and analytics: States are examining ways to make better use of health and human services data to improve program operations and outcomes for clients. Data management and analytic tools allow states to merge data from multiple sources (e.g., case records and claims databases) and analyze it at the case, program, or population level to support better decision-making.
- Mobile tools: States and counties are using mobile tools to help people understand, access, use, and keep their benefits. Some states have adapted their client portals for phones and tablets. A number have also developed mobile "apps." Other are working to incorporate mobile tools into their workflow.

Since 2010, a group of nonprofit social technology organizations have created public, direct-to-consumer web, and mobile platforms to increase access to nutrition assistance and other safety-net services. For

example, there are now technology tools that provide eligibility screeners, community-based services referral platforms, rules engines, and other tools that allow people to quickly see if they are eligible for SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, childcare assistance, and other programs. And they can tell people about their eligibility status and connect them directly to these programs in a matter of minutes.

Yet, despite the availability of this technology and the increased usage of these tools and an increased use of technology, food insecurity has only grown and barriers and inequities in accessing safety-net services remain.

To address food insecurity, it is important to look at the both the socioeconomic and racial/ethnic makeup of those who are food insecure to figure out where the systemic problems exist. Consider the following data:

- An analysis of Census Household Pulse Survey (CHHPS) showed that during the COVID-19 crisis, rates of food insecurity among Black households with children were twice as high as they are among White households with children. Rates for Latinx households were 60% higher than they are among Whites. These ratios are like their historical patterns in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS), which for over 20 years has collected annual data on food insecurity experienced over the past year.
- For rates averaged across April–June 2020 from the CHHPS, estimates of food insecurity doubled for White and Latinx households and increased by 60% for Black households.
- We find that the share of those households reporting "sometimes" or "often" not enough to eat during the last week in the CHHPS has more than tripled for White and Latinx households, and more than doubled for Black households.
- Consistent with the disparities in food insecurity seen, a series of other economic indicators that can be calculated from the CHHPS for unemployment, making next month's mortgage/rent payment, or buying all the food they need in the next month show worse conditions among Black and Latinx households, and in many cases seem to be part of a worsening trend.

Why do these inequities remain despite the increased use of technology?

Here are a few key reasons:

1) Technology alone does not address equity. The former Director of Tennessee's Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Dr. Alvin Weinberg coined the term "tech-fix" in 1966 to describe a myth—that technology is primarily a problem solver. Although the potential of technology to create opportunities for people who are disenfranchised and locked out of opportunity should be pursued aggressively, there must also be a pragmatic assessment about what it can and cannot do. Technology alone will not level entrenched historical inequities. Said another way, there is not always an app to help people who are poor and experiencing insecurity. Despite the ongoing claims that better, modern technology and technology approaches can work as a "social leveler" with the capacity to "erode the relative power of all kinds of hierarchies structured on the control of information," significant intervention into the design and deployment of this technology is always required be required if any of its equalizing tendencies are to be realized. We must always hold that technology, then, is one tool, not "the" answer. Deployed wisely, it can significantly advance important human development goals—like addressing hunger and poverty. Without support to make it equally available, and without integrating it into a more comprehensive solution, it will only aggravate existing inequities. To realize its potential, technology must be combined with other first order resources like food and housing, and second order resources like researching and understanding your people to build ladders out of persistent hunger and poverty.

2) Technology success is measured by ability to scale, but solutions to social problems are not easily scalable due to the complexity of people's needs. "Scaling" is in the DNA of the technologist. Part of what makes digital technology so powerful is that it scales up so easily. Twitter has more than 300

million active users; the user base of Facebook exceeds 1 billion. That kind of scalability does not exist in the social sector. No nonprofit or government agency has the market penetration of Twitter or Facebook. Yet technology tempts nonprofit and government leaders into thinking that scaling up is the only path forward—that they can reach more people by removing the human factor from their work.

3) While technology can amplify effective solutions, it can amplify entrenched inequities too. Yet, we have countless stories of technological "silver bullets" missing their target due to a lack of understanding a fundamental truth of technology—it is only an amplifying force. It can only amplify effective solutions, and it can only amplify entrenched inequities. Putting computers in the hands of poor children (as the much-publicized One Laptop Per Child initiative aimed to do) or increasing the availability of online portals and mobile applications (as over 35 states have made available) has not affected the rates of hunger or poverty. While these efforts are not bad, they focus primarily on using tools—tools that do not work in isolation.

   Ruha Benjamin's statement in *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* talks about how technology drives this dynamic when designed, developed, and implemented without careful analysis and attention to race and outcomes. As Benjamin states:

   "Zeros and ones, if we are not careful, could deepen the divides between haves and have-nots, between the deserving and the undeserving – rusty value judgments embedded in shiny new systems."

How should we use technology to alleviate hunger and address inequity?

Designing, developing, and implementing technology with a lens towards people would reduce help technology take a long step towards contributing to addressing food insecurity.

An important lesson from technology that gets lost when applying technology to social questions is that we are not "that" good at judging people needs/requirements, and that there is a need to separate our beliefs/expectations from people's actual choice making and behaviors.

A focus on "problem-solution fit" where technology ventures quickly and easily test user's behavior with their ideas before developing anything is needed. If we can find a method to test our solutions, and to be prepared to change them—quickly—based on deep understanding of people's situation, behaviors, attitudes, problems, and goals, then technology would be able to really begin to address big social challenges like hunger and poverty. The technology community takes such an approach when it uses "lean and agile" approaches to ensuring the best product/service. If social technology firms can develop similar approaches, then over time we can really address big social challenges, not by following our initial solutions, but by following a test-driven method to addressing challenges.

There are 5 things that can be incorporated into how to design, develop, and implement technology that would address equity and contribute to alleviating hunger:

1) **Acknowledge that race and class inequality is a core issue to be addressed.**

2) **Use technology to learn more about the direct experience of people seeking help and incorporate the voices of people of color to make technology work.** Technology, whether it be a website or an app, never exists in isolation. A person using it always has a goal, and your technology is just part of the journey they are on to achieve that goal. Having a deep understanding of people's situation, behaviors, attitudes, problems, and goals will allow for understanding how your technology fits into with the wider journey people are on. What gets them to the site? How does it link with other parts of other physical services like the food bank or the WIC provider? Where will someone go next to

achieve their goal? Thinking in services means we are always thinking about where people are coming from, where they will go next and how we support them throughout that journey.

3) **Ensure the voices of the affected population (particularly communities of color and low-wealth communities) are incorporated and centered in the build of technology solutions.** Before building or designing anything, start by researching and understanding people needs, and keep them involved, not only at the start but with ongoing research and feedback. It will allow technology to meet both people's preferences and behaviors, as well as their 'social' needs. These two needs can sometimes clash, which means thoughtful research-led design is even more important, to ensure the service provided by technology will be both used, and beneficial.

4) **Hold technology vendors accountable, <u>who you work with matters</u>.** Intent matters in who public agencies partners and it has a profound effect on government's ability to affect hunger and poverty rates. And there is rarely if ever a conversation about this. For example, many health plans are heavily invested in social referral platforms that are supported by venture capital resources. This financing structure creates a dynamic where scales matter more than help. As a result, in many communities the lack of careful attention to connecting people to help results in food insecure people unwittingly being referred to social services agencies with either low capacity or low willingness to participate. In the worst cases creating a lose-lose-lose scenario

   The federal and state governments almost universally contract with private corporations to administer their public benefits programs. Service providers, such as hospitals, also hire private companies to help them maximize payment claims. States then hire more private companies to reduce their payouts to providers and increase their claims from the federal government. Further, the federal government hires the same or similar companies to audit Medicaid, SNAP, TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), WIC, etc., and review state actions.

   Privatization in the implementation space has been preferred for efficiency reasons. Yet these types of public/private partnerships have led to monopolies especially for government IT (Information Technology) projects. Despite billions of dollars spent by government to modernize IT systems, access to safety-net services has only become more challenging (e.g., unemployment benefits), and has not moved the needle on poverty or food insecurity.

   There is also a power imbalance between government and private actors because government does not hold private actors accountable and private actors are often able to hold government hostage given the size and amount of government contracts. Although it has the authority to do so, the federal government rarely pursues prosecution against revenue maximization schemes, and these companies rarely face consequences.

   <u>Specific suggestions</u>:

   - Directly incorporate contracting equity programs into state and local procurement departments to help spread economic development to all communities and allow state and local governments to express their values of inclusion.
   - Establish contracting equity policies and programs within state and local procurement departments based on an analysis of the barriers faced by people of color, women, and non-profit business enterprises in a specific geographic target.

5) **Increase diversity in vendor procurement.** This requires a concerted effort by the public and non-profit sectors to change both who and what they invest in, and how they work together to create the foundation necessary to streamline and simplify access to help. Nonprofit social enterprises and certified B corporations have shown they can be potential partners that bring the technical expertise required for policy implementation while maintaining a shared commitment to advancing equity.

   Specific suggestions:

   - Streamline the vendor certification process.
   - Incentivize and set up goals for a minimum percent of contracts that must be awarded to people of color, women, and non-profits.

Technology alone cannot create the kind of change needed to advance equity. It is merely a tool that must be part of a more considerable effort that includes a human element. In his book "Geek Heresy," Kentaro Toyama writes that pushing the integration of technology into the work of policy change is about using "packaged interventions to amplify the right human forces."

The pursuit of the equity agenda is a marathon. Example after example of social change efforts show this to be true. There will be victories, but there will undoubtedly be setbacks. For goals as ambitious as ending the predictive power of race/ethnicity, gender, geography, generation, and socioeconomic status in connection to economic security and social opportunity, there is a need to focus both on long-term policy targets and on capacity building and learning.