

**Statement for the Record**  
**Submitted by**  
**The Kansas Food Action Network**  
**for the hearing**  
**Ending Hunger in America: Family Budgets and Food Insecurity**  
**October 13, 2021**

Chairman McGovern, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record on behalf of the Kansas Food Action Network. We are a statewide advocacy organization comprised of more than 30 local food, farm, and policy councils, and dozens of stakeholders building resilient local and state food systems in Kansas. Despite the fact 90% of land in the state is reserved for agricultural purposes, nearly half a million Kansans struggle to feed themselves. Perhaps no one knows better than Kansas that food insecurity has very little to do with the people who need to eat. Rather, food insecurity is the consequence of a system failing to work as it should. When a food system fails, the impact is disproportionately felt by low-income, vulnerable Americans in the form of hunger—the body's biological response when it is unable to consume enough nutritionally-dense food. These impacts can be further exacerbated by competing household costs which push food security even further out of reach for low-income Americans.

Synthesizing the nuanced experiences of millions into a singular, poignant narrative that is accessible to someone who has never experienced food insecurity is a daunting task for an advocate. Therefore, although this testimony is offered under my professional title, I would like to use this opportunity to speak not from a position of subject matter expertise, but from the perspective of someone with lived experience regarding the matter before this committee.

Several years ago, before I was the director of a statewide food system advocacy organization, before I was named a Mitchell Scholar; before I held two masters degrees or was a first-generation college student, I was the eldest of three children in a two-parent household which sat just above the federal poverty line for the better part of twenty-five years. I no longer live under such grave financial restrictions; however, my journey out of food insecurity is not the rule, but the exception. The reality is, I should not be in the position I am, a position that allows me to be invited to submit this testimony. The odds were against me, as they continue to be for millions of Americans currently living in the clutches of hunger and despair.

While my siblings and I were young, my family received benefits from the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program and supplemented them with assistance from our church food pantry. Although we likely would have qualified for most of my childhood, the only instances in which my parents applied for SNAP benefits coincided with the two times we were evicted: once when I was a toddler, and again on the day I left for college.

During this 16-year gap between our receipt of SNAP benefits, I experienced first-hand the profound effect competing costs (both fixed and emergency) had on the food my family consumed, and how it was prepared.

As in many food-insecure homes, meals in our home were based on what was available. Moreover, cost, ease of preparation, and quantity produced consistently took priority over the nutritional benefits of food. As such, we relied on the inexpensive, highly processed staples one might expect (ramen, boxed macaroni and cheese, etc.). If it could be purchased for under \$1.00 or found at a store within walking

distance from our home, it was a dietary staple in our home. This was especially important with only one car to a family of five. When my parents had time, they channeled their culinary prowess into making large batch meals out of relatively few ingredients. Potatoes would often replace protein or could be used to increase the size of the recipe, stretching it over multiple meals.

Although many low-income Americans only have access to a hotplate or microwave for cooking preparation, my family was fortunate to have access to a stove, oven, and microwave. However, on the frequent occasion that the utilities had been turned off due to non-payment, the most budget-friendly option was to purchase a \$25 tank of propane to power an old outdoor grill. The grill could be used to cook or bake most anything our electric oven could prepare. If the gas had been turned off, the grill could also be used to boil water for bathing, cleaning clothes, or washing dishes.

In 2008, right about the time my family started to feel the economic impact of the Great Recession, I became of legal working age. I applied and was hired at a local ice cream store that was within walking distance of home and school. Almost immediately, my paychecks went to helping make ends meet at home. For a period of several months during my senior year of high school, it was the only income we had. As such, I began making the choice to skip my last two classes of the day to get a few more hours on the clock at work. It was an untenable strategy, however, that led to detention and threats of delayed graduation. Conversely, it did little to close the financial cavern we were experiencing at home. Towards the end of summer, I went grocery shopping one evening after work. Having just been paid, I had \$600 to divide between \$2,500 worth of past-due household bills, groceries, and gas money to drive myself to college the next week—an impossible situation for anyone, regardless of age.

After starting college, a feat made possible by a full-ride scholarship for which only low-income, first-generation students were eligible, I worked three jobs to support myself and assist my family back home who, having had not yet resettled from our recent eviction, were living in a friend's trailer home with no heat. Meanwhile, on the infrequent occasion I ate lunch with friends in the college cafeteria, I watched plates of uneaten food be dumped into bins and remembered the times my family had made bean burritos stretch for a week until pay day. Although my scholarship paid for a meal plan, I rarely made use of it as my rigorous work schedule overlapped with dining hours. With little extra money to pay for food, I relied on coping strategies that had followed me through adolescence: filling up on water, chewing mint gum, and investing in weight loss tea to suppress hunger hormones and get through the day. Years later, while conducting research for my masters thesis on food insecurity among college students, I found these, and other, strategies are shared among college students who were experiencing food insecurity. (Klugesherz, 2017).

During my sophomore year of college, my introductory level political science class included a unit on safety net programs. I listened to my professor define and review the details of SNAP, WIC, and TANF, and then attempt to spark the age-old discussion about the role of government in the lives of the poor and hungry. As the conversation took off, I found myself paralyzed, terrified that speaking up about the reality of being poor in America would label me as one of *“those people”* who, in the opinion of my classmates, *“haven’t worked hard enough,”* have *“made poor choices,”* or *“need to learn how to get through life like everyone else.”* That day, I let my classmates define my character and make judgements about my worth as a human being. I sat silent as they made policy recommendations based only on their ability to navigate the world unimpeded.

Had I spoken up in class, I could have told my peers how my mom worked two jobs to afford the public transit bus pass which allowed my sister and I to participate in a magnet program at a junior high 45-

minutes away. I would have shared how my dad studied for his real estate license in a garage filled with bags of family trash (because trash pickup was a luxury) only to have the 2008 recession render his efforts moot. I would have told my peers about *decision fatigue*: the utter exhaustion experienced by low-income families who are forced to make a risk-benefit analysis about every step they take:

*"If I eat this meal now, I won't have it tomorrow when I need to be able to think for that meeting."*

*"If I take that promotion at work, my pay will only go up by \$50 a month, but I'll lose my SNAP benefits which are \$200 a month. It would be better long-term, but how do I feed my family in the meantime?"*

*"I can't buy food that needs to be refrigerated or prepared because the power will be turned off tomorrow, so I will just bring the kids fast food for dinner this week. I won't be able to buy much next week, but at least they'll be fed."*

That which requires little-to-no thought or effort on behalf of a middle-class family requires the utmost planning and attention by low-income Americans. It may be overwhelming to members of this committee when considering the numerous variables that can intervene and prevent one from achieving food security. I challenge you to take that perspective and put yourself in the position of someone who, like my family, may only be able to see a few hours in front of themselves due to the emotional and financial pressure of living in survival mode.

As this hearing has made abundantly clear, hunger and food insecurity do not exist in a silo. These challenges demand a multi-sector, collaborative approach. We ask for continued support for the nutritional safety net – such as **SNAP**, **WIC**, **TEFAP** and **CSFP** – but we also urge this committee to consider the role programs and policies outside the purview of the Department of Agriculture can play in addressing food insecurity in America. Furthermore, we ask this committee to reframe its commitment from addressing *hunger* to addressing *food insecurity*. This distinction is critical because attempts to address hunger will inevitably result in temporary solutions. Vital, life-saving solutions, but nonetheless temporary. By addressing food insecurity, the focus moves away from triage and towards examination of root causes. Finally, we will begin to develop long-term, systemic, resilient solutions. The health, safety, and prosperity of our country depends upon it.

Respectfully Submitted,

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KC Healthy Kids