

Statement for the Record
Ending Hunger in America, with Respect for Each Person's Dignity

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I had spent most of my life caring for other people when suddenly and unexpectedly, circumstances caused me to become someone who needed assistance. I hope that by sharing my story, I might help policy makers understand that for this great country to realize its full potential, we need to do more to support people who are struggling. Beyond providing basic food to help people make ends meet, we must set the expectation that every person's dignity should be recognized and honored. And we should make sure organizations and programs designed to help people who are struggling receive the resources, the support, and the mandate to deliver on that expectation.

I was born in Haiti, and I moved to New York City in the 1980s to go to college. I became a nurse, got married, and gave birth to two wonderful children. In 1992, I went through a difficult divorce and moved with my daughters from New York to Montgomery County, Maryland, just outside of Washington, DC.

As a single parent, I was determined to do whatever it took to support my daughters. I sometimes held two or three jobs to make ends meet, working from before the sun was up, until after sunset. It was hard work, but I liked being able to help people. I also got satisfaction from helping members of my Church community who were struggling financially. I felt fortunate that I was able to live in this community, give back in ways that I could, and support my family with a lifestyle that was better than what I had experienced growing up in Haiti.

After working for 40 years in the healthcare field, things changed very suddenly when I began experiencing bouts of weakness and dizziness. I fell several times, and I could no longer work. Eventually, my doctor said I needed spinal surgery and for a couple of years after that I required a wheelchair to get around. I manage with a cane and a walker now but have not been able to return to work.

Without a paycheck, I have struggled to afford rent, utilities, and food. At first, I resorted to "tricks" I knew from growing up poor in Haiti. I would take two slices of bread and soak them in water with spices, hot peppers, and an onion. I could make this bread soup last for two or three days, but I knew that I was not getting enough nutrition.

After years of being a source of support and care for my daughters, my patients, and my community, I did not know where to go for help, and I also felt ashamed to ask. Illness can take a mental and emotional toll and my self-esteem was very low at times. It didn't help that I was not always treated with basic decency and respect. I will never forget the times I went to pick up my medicine and the people working at the pharmacy barely said a word to me. They would not even look me in the eye. I believe being an African American woman in a wheelchair made people treat me differently, and experiences like this made me feel like I was nothing.

Even though I often went hungry, I feared that I would be treated with similar disregard if I asked for assistance. One day, a friend told me about Manna Food Center. I didn't want to go, but I also felt like I didn't have much choice. Today, I can honestly say that if it wasn't for Manna, I might be dead by now of starvation.

The first time I went to Manna, the staff and volunteers received me with dignity, with love, with care. No one talked down to me, no one ever put me down, from my first visit in 2014 until today.

I learned about other food assistance organizations in my community, and I sometimes went to them as well. I experienced firsthand what a difference it makes when an organization treats people with respect and dignity.

Sometimes when I would call other agencies, they would say I needed to wait until next month to get food. There was not a time when Manna told me I had to wait. I could not bring myself to tell my doctor that I was not getting enough food, but the staff and volunteers at Manna would notice if I was losing weight, and they would say, "Please call us, you can always come in to get more food."

Manna never let me beg for food. They never asked me what happened, or why I needed food. At other agencies, I have had to stand in a long line, sometimes in the heat or cold, waiting for someone to yell out my name. Manna has a place to sit down, so I never have to stand in line. Volunteers give me cold water to drink in the summer. There is soft music playing in the market. The volunteers at the front desk always greet me with respect -- there is no yelling.

At Manna, they follow you closely, like family. When I had back surgery I was at home, unable to pick up food. The day that I called, the Manna volunteer who answered the phone said, "What happened, we haven't seen you in three months!" When I explained, she said that Manna can deliver food to you if you are sick and cannot come to pick it up. Manna always

gives me good, nutritious food. In the market, you can choose the foods that you like to prepare, and there is always a lot of beautiful fresh fruits and vegetables.

I would like to see our government do more so that Manna can serve even more people, and so that there can be more organizations like Manna so everyone who is struggling to afford food can access good quality food -- and be treated with respect.

I also believe more resources should be dedicated to educating people about the assistance that is available to them when they are struggling. This is especially important in immigrant communities, where many people just don't know how the system works, and where there can be fear and mistrust. Because I worked in the healthcare field, I knew of MobileMed, a local organization that provides health care services to low income people in our community. But there are so many resources that I didn't know were available. For example, even though I had paid into the Social Security system at my job, I wasn't aware that I could receive benefits when I became ill and could no longer work. Only after three years, when a doctor called Social Security for me, did I finally begin receiving payments.

Thanks to the respect and love I have received at Manna, I no longer feel ashamed that I am one of many people in this country who sometimes struggle and need assistance. However, I do feel ashamed when I talk to friends and family in other countries and say that here in America, I don't have enough food to eat, and that there are millions of people in this country who experience hunger on a regular basis. I am sure that we can do better.