
Opinion

As I See It: Mothers raising voices against proposed cuts to federal nutrition benefits

By Diane Sullivan / and Juell Frazier

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Congress will reconvene from summer break tomorrow in Washington, D.C., and will take up deliberations on the 2018 Farm Bill, including potential cuts to nutritional assistance.

Nearly 40 million Americans rely on the federal government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to help feed their families, the majority receiving partial SNAP benefits to supplement low income. Indeed, the average SNAP benefit in Massachusetts is a mere \$215/month per household.

More than 760,000 Massachusetts residents access SNAP, and still 1 in 8 children in our state still live under conditions known as "food insecure," meaning that family income doesn't guarantee enough money to cover every meal in a month.

If all goes according to plan, a Farm Bill "Conference Committee" of 47 House and Senate members will sift through differences between each chamber's proposal and submit a final 2018 Farm Bill to the full House and Senate, which if approved will be sent to President Donald Trump for approval. The voluminous agricultural bill for the fiscal year starting October 1 authorizes or reauthorizes spending for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including measures such as crop insurance, farm subsidies and conservation – with the SNAP program representing the largest single piece.

The House version of the Farm Bill cuts deep into our nation's first line of defense against hunger, seeking to punish families and individuals who are working or seeking work. It includes an expansion of work requirements, puts unrealistically burdensome reporting requirements on individual recipients, and creates a "cliff effect" that would unfairly cut off all benefits from many low-wage workers. The Senate came with a more bi-partisan approach, voting to preserve and protect the SNAP program from cuts.

As mothers who have experienced hunger with our children, we know all too well the trauma and consequences hunger has visited upon our families.

We know how harmful cuts to SNAP are to low-income children, to unemployed and under-employed adults, to older adults and persons with disabilities, to military families and veterans the program is intended to serve.

We know that lack of access to food directly affects the health and well-being of our children. We haven't just read the studies. We've lived them.

As advocates, we share our personal experiences to help shape sound and just policies to address hunger and poverty in Massachusetts and beyond. We do this because we are the faces behind the proposed legislation and budget cuts. We are the lives directly impacted.

We are the voices that too often go unheard as our ability to feed our children is kicked around like some political football. We may not have the resources to advocate for our priorities in D.C. as corporate lobbyists do, but we do know we will not be voiceless in Washington, D.C.

Local, state and national anti-hunger groups are deep in the fight against these ill-informed proposed cuts to SNAP in the House version that would rip food right out of the mouths of hungry Americans. We also have an anti-hunger champion in Congressman Jim McGovern, who serves on the 2018 Farm Bill Conference Committee, sharing with congressional colleagues stories of hunger among constituents right here in Massachusetts.

Not knowing where your child's next meal will come from is a frightening place to be. Imagine how terrifying that is for a child. You cannot create the illusion of food by rearranging boxes and cans when the fridge and pantry are nearly bare.

You cannot ask your child to drink enough water to drown out the hunger pangs and rumblings. We know what juggling low-paying and inconsistent work with the high cost of housing, food, utilities and other basic necessities for our families looks and feels like. We know how even one slight disruption to this delicate balance can send everything crashing to the ground.

We know what it's like when, despite our hard work all week, the struggle remains to make ends meet. We know what happens when our SNAP benefits have run out for the month, and the pay check is still days away.

We know how it feels to check your dignity at the door of a food pantry, despite being so grateful for the help.

Knowing how critical the SNAP program has been to our families, we urge Congress to hear our voices and to reject the House-proposed cuts.

Diane Sullivan, of Medford, and Juell Frazier, of Boston, co-lead the Boston site of the national group, Witnesses to Hunger, a research and advocacy project of Drexel University's Center for Hunger-Free Communities in Philadelphia. Both are mothers with lived experience of poverty and hunger.