

**Testimony of
Tianna Gaines-Turner
Chair, Witnesses to Hunger**

**before the
Committee on the Budget
United States House of Representatives**

***Hearing*
The War on Poverty: A Progress Report
July 31, 2013**

Chairman Paul Ryan and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for requesting and considering this written testimony. My name is Tianna Gaines-Turner. I am married to the father of our 3 biological children. I have a son who is 9 years old and on the honor roll, going into 4th grade, and I have twins, age 5, who are starting kindergarten in September. I also have three teenage stepchildren, whom I love dearly. I have worked with the Witnesses to Hunger program, a growing group of parents who speak out as the true expert witnesses on hunger and poverty in America.

I work part time for a childcare provider at a recreation center making about \$10 dollars an hour and my husband works behind the deli counter at a grocery store making \$8 dollars an hour. We haven't been able to find full time jobs. With the part time jobs, our incomes go up and down. Not only do we have incomes that are inadequate, but they are also unstable and unpredictable. When programs like SNAP (food stamps) rely on stable income reports, it makes it harder to keep this nutrition support steady. So we may lose food stamps one month because we make too much, and then a few months later, when our companies choose to reduce our hours at their own convenience, we make less money and we need to turn to food stamps again to feed our kids healthy meals. But, then we might get an opportunity to work a few more hours, and then we lose the food stamps again—all in the space of six months, and never with the right timing. What happens, then, is we often run out of money for food. There is a research study I read that's called "Working for Peanuts" that shows when families have unpredictable hours at low paying jobs, that the families are more likely to be "food insecure." That's my family.

My three children have medical issues that concern me every day. All of my children suffer from epilepsy and have to take life-saving medication every day. All three of my children also have moderate to severe asthma. I worry about a day that might come where my children won't be able to see a specialist because I can't afford the co-pay. In addition, neither my husband nor I qualify for medical assistance because we make too much money in our part time jobs, but our jobs do not offer health insurance. I, too, suffer from asthma and epilepsy. I currently can't afford to get an inhaler. The thought that my own children may not be able to get the care they need worries me every day. Just like you want the best for your children, I want the best for my children.

This is very important for you to know. What I am going to show you is that issues of medical care, housing, and food all go hand in hand.

There have been times when my oldest son was sick or having seizures, and of course, as would you, I wanted to be at the hospital to care for him and help him get the care he needed, and to comfort him. But that meant my husband had to stay home to take care of the twins. And then we were both unable to work, so we lost money that month, and ultimately had to make a choice – do we pay the rent or do we pay the light bill? Not to mention, how do we buy food?



"Every time my son got sick, their dad had to take off of work. That's money we're missing. That means: Do we pay the rent or do we pay the light bill?"

No family should have to choose between paying a bill or putting food on the table. In my work with Witnesses to Hunger, I read many research studies by Children's HealthWatch that showed that food, medical issues, paying for utilities and housing all go hand and hand.

Poverty is not just one issue that can be solved at one time. It's not just an issue of jobs, or food, or housing, or utility assistance, and safety. It's a people issue. And you can't slice people up into issues. We are whole human beings. Poverty has to do with a whole person who is in a family, in a neighborhood, in a community, and our country. The policies you work on in the House of Representatives affect me and my family in very deep and important ways. I am living out your policy-making and I see how your decisions affect both physical and mental health, especially the physical and mental health of my children and me.

Let's get something straight. We've heard some leaders say that people who are poor are lazy, or that they need to work harder. But that is a very wrong view. Most low-income families I know are working harder than many other people who make a lot more money, and they're working sometimes 2-3 jobs to make ends meet. We're playing by the rules, but we're not getting ahead.

Playing By the Rules—Working

I am not sure at what point the American dream—of knowing that if you worked hard, you would survive—ended. But it has for my family, and for many in my communities. Working one or even multiple jobs is no longer enough. Wages are so low and expenses are so high that even if you are able to find work, it may not be enough to even pay for the expense of childcare. I have heard too often the story of people finally getting a job, just to have their childcare assistance taken away. They no longer qualify for the assistance at the exact moment they need it most. Just when someone is moving forward, the rug is ripped out from under

them. This cycle pushes families deeper into poverty than they were before they took the job. This system needs to change in order for people like myself to forge a better future for myself and my children, one where I will never need to turn to public assistance again.

Good Nutrition

Relying on food stamps is not an easy process. When I hear the story about a person buying lobster using their SNAP benefits, I am frustrated because *it is not the reality*. People on SNAP count every penny they have and cut every corner they can to make sure their children do not starve. I know of many families through my work with Witnesses to Hunger who describe having to put their children to bed before dinner because there was nothing to feed the children, or others who look at food menus delivered to their door so that they can *imagine* ordering dinner and trick themselves into thinking they've eaten, when actually they have not eaten in days. The reality is that SNAP keeps us from starving. It is critical to the survival of the 50% of American children who will rely on the program at some point in their lives.

For me, feeding my family properly has become a strategic obsession. No matter how diligent I am to cut coupons or only buy things on sale, the benefits never last. Most nights my husband and I make our dinners on what is left over on our children's plates – we call it “kids plate surfing.” We are able to get by thanks to SNAP, but we are not eating well.

I know that a proper diet is critical for the health and well-being of my children, that nutrients are key to their development. I also know that if my benefits are cut that means less meals and less nutritious food. Cutting a person's benefits by \$10, \$15, or \$20 might not seem like a lot to legislators, but it would cut meals out completely for families like mine. Without SNAP, I would still feed my kids, but it would be cheap Oodles of Noodles with lots of sodium and a bunch of ingredients I can't recognize or pronounce. They would not get fresh vegetables and fruit.

Because I am active in addressing hunger, and work with researchers around the country, I've seen that this year, the Institute of Medicine proved that SNAP benefits do not last, because the monthly SNAP benefit is not enough for a healthy diet. My family, friends and community could have told you that years ago. But the thing is, people wouldn't believe us because they would somehow think it was our fault. The Institute of Medicine shows that it's not our fault. It is the system we have that needs improvement.

Safe and affordable housing

My family and I have been homeless twice in the last several years.

There was a house that we could afford to rent when the twins were newborns. The day we moved in, people in the neighborhood told us to stay inside because there was going to be a shoot out. There were children everywhere on this street. That's not a safe place to live, but



"The hardship of being homeless with children is what I would like people to see. When you look into my children's faces and in their eyes in that picture, they're only one and five years old, but you can see the stress and the loneliness. When you're homeless it seems like it's not just being homeless from having a home; it's being homeless from having self-respect and self-worth, and just not being able to do what you want to do."



"I used to take them to the playground when we were homeless so they wouldn't have to think about the situation they were in. They could just be kids."

it's all I could afford! And there was a terrible rodent problem on the block—mice and cockroaches. And, as you know, those are the things that make asthma worse—they are asthma triggers. So I was spending too much money on an exterminator to no avail, and spending too much time in the emergency room. We moved out because it was unsafe and unhealthy. We took our tiny savings to stay in a hotel until we could find a place that we could afford that was safe and wouldn't make us sick.

When we were homeless we would sleep on my mother-in-law's couch, and take the kids to the playground so they wouldn't have to think about their situation. At the playground, they could just be kids.

During this time, I was on the waiting list for Section 8. And it turns out my name in the system—after 10 years of waiting—was actually approved. They tried to send the forms to our old address, but they had the spelling of the street wrong, so it never reached us. We didn't know about this for months. And because we never responded, we were put back to the bottom of the waitlist. All of the housing forms are still paper based. It is a system that is still in the Stone Age.

It took a call from a legislator's office to get that situation fixed. Thanks to Section 8 finally working out, I now live in a slightly safer neighborhood. Yet there are still abandoned homes on our street, shootouts in the bar down the street, and several homeless people who stay under the bridge in the nearby subway.

Giving back

Chairman Ryan recently said that people need to get involved in their communities and help each other out, because getting together to help each other out is much better than government benefits. But, if you actually came into our communities, actually invited us to talk with you about what it's like to be on government benefits, you would learn that government benefits are actually helping us stay healthy.

You would also see that helping each other out is exactly what we do, every day to survive.

Every day I help my community, and I give back. I've helped loved ones, neighbors, strangers. People ask how you can help others when you need help yourself. But that's what we're supposed to do – work together and try to support each other through our struggles. My neighbors and I recently received donated food. We took the food to an abandoned house on our block, and we set up a place on the porch where people could come and get food. We didn't need to know how much you made. We didn't need to see any identification. If you were hungry, if you wanted food, we gave it to you. I also check in with an elderly neighbor every day. Her entire Social Security check goes to rent and utilities, with hardly any money left over for food. But I do what I can to make sure she feels supported.

Moments like these are not unique. They happen every day throughout our country. And if our government officials and policymakers took the time to really look at and try to understand the communities they are supposed to represent, they would see that. Instead, they use hateful language and make ignorant comments. They use phrases like “those people.” They make it seem like there are two sets of humans – them and us. There is no such thing as “those people” – we are *all* people. We are all the same. Just because you live where you live and I live where I live doesn't make us different. We are all part of the same community. So we need more thoughtful, healing language to talk with each other respectfully. Only this way, can we solve poverty.

A hand “in” not a hand out

You may have heard people say “we don't want a hand out, we want a hand up.” I say we don't want a hand out or a hand up, we want a hand *in*. Include us. If you want to find solutions to the issues that people face while living in poverty, people actually living in poverty need to be part of the discussion when decisions are being made. If you do not have an understanding of the struggles, how can you try to solve them? I am not a number, I am not a statistic, I am an American citizen. I have a voice and you need to hear it. We are the real experts. We know American policies *first hand*.

When I talk about people who are poor, I am not just talking about families like mine. I am also talking about our elders, all families with young children, and the military soldiers who come home and cannot get the services and supports they need. I am talking about the disabled and the mentally ill, our immigrant families and our American Indian brothers and sisters who live in a kind of economic poverty far worse than my own. People living in poverty need serious, comprehensive attention.

These are my recommendations:

1) Put together a task force on poverty

This task force should include Democrats and Republicans, and should represent rural, urban

and suburban areas. This task force should seek guidance and advice from the government agencies whose programs and policies touch people living in poverty every day. Most importantly, you must include people who know poverty first hand who live in your districts. Every single congressional district in this country reported food hardship. I know there are many people out there who are ready, willing and capable to stand up and help.

2) Invest in good jobs with fair pay

Look to the corporations to be your friends in ending poverty. Don't let companies pay low salaries so that hard working people like me still have to rely on government assistance. Also, someone working hard should not be penalized for getting a job or a getting a raise, and then immediately get cut off of assistance. Public assistance programs need to support people as they transition out of poverty, not drop them off a cliff, leaving them worse off than when they started.

3) Invest in good nutrition

Fix the SNAP program now. People need access to healthy, affordable food. Programs that help low-income families put food on the table need to be protected and fully funded. Remember that food stamps are a good investment in our health and wellbeing. If we don't get enough food stamps, we won't be healthy – we'll be in the emergency room, and that costs the country more money.

4) Invest in housing

No families with young children should have to suffer homelessness. According to The National Center on Family Homelessness, there are over 1.6 million children in this country who are homeless each year. Being homeless is stressful and degrading. Make housing affordable, and fix the waiting lists for families who are playing by the rules.

5) Invest in health and prevention of disease

Support access to health care. Little kids, and their moms like me, need to stay healthy and strong. Health care is a good investment.

6) Invest in building assets

All families need opportunities to build their own safety net. I only got my first bank account a few years ago. Now I am saving money for my kids to go to college. Lots of low-income families need more access to low cost or free bank accounts so we can get a hand *in* the financial mainstream. We also need to be allowed to save while we are receiving assistance, not be kicked off for just having a little more than nothing.

Conclusion

Working with low-income people is necessary for our country to find a solution to poverty. We need constant conversation and action. The pot must be constantly stirred, not just once in a blue moon. And we can't just be at a simmer. We need to be cooking at full blast so we can all sit together in a respectful way, talk with each other, and actually listen and understand, so we can make a plan for action.

I promise I will work with you. And I know millions of Americans just like me who will work with you to help you with the answers to poverty that you seek. We invite you to come to Philadelphia to see where and how we live, to come to our grocery stores, childcare centers, and elder homes, and to visit with my neighbors. And then we can talk like equals, and join in the idea of putting poverty in the past, of investing in helping American people do and be their best. It's the patriotic thing to do.

References

1. "Working for Peanuts: Nonstandard Work and Food Insecurity Across Household Structure." by Alicia Coleman-Jensen. Found at <https://www.opressrc.org/content/working-peanuts-nonstandard-work-and-food-insecurity-across-household-structure>
2. Children's HealthWatch Research Studies. Found at <http://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/page.php?id=50>
3. Institute of Medicine report on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the evidence to define benefit adequacy. Found at <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2013/Supplemental-Nutrition-Assistance-Program-Examining-the-Evidence-to-Define-Benefit-Adequacy.aspx>