Ending Hunger and Poverty
Recommendations from Witnesses to Hunger

This year, as we recognize the 50th Anniversary of the War on Poverty, the media, advocates and legislators have worked to improve the conversations around issues of hunger and poverty in America. People are working to determine where there have been successes, and where further strategizing is still needed.

The mothers and fathers of Witnesses to Hunger know firsthand the struggles of poverty and hunger. As experts in how government assistance programs are working on the ground, they know what works and what doesn’t. They have a lot of ideas on how to end poverty and how to increase opportunities for all families in America.

![Image](Jean C., Witnesses to Hunger, Scranton)

Key Recommendations:
1) Create a comprehensive national plan to end hunger. This demands government and corporate accountability, involves the people who know hunger and poverty firsthand in all decision-making, and encourages public participation.

2) Encourage employers to provide living wages and family-oriented labor policies.

3) Restructure government assistance programs to prevent the cliff effect (being cut off of benefits too soon right after getting an increase in wages), allowing families to truly transition to self-sufficiency.

4) Demand widespread culture change and accountability in the human services sector towards a culture of respect towards those seeking help.
Create a Comprehensive Plan, with Input from the Experts

Congress must make ending hunger and poverty in America its number one priority. Our country must create a comprehensive, national plan that addresses all pieces of the poverty crisis in this country. Congress cannot do this alone. They must involve the people who know these issues best – those who know hunger and poverty firsthand.

The members of Witnesses, and millions of Americans like them, are hard-working mothers, fathers, and caregivers. They only want what is best for their families. They want their children to succeed and to live out their dreams. They want to see their communities and neighbors thrive. And they will not stop advocating and sharing their ideas for change until they see a more fair and just America.

Encouragement

“We were waiting in line for Christmas dinner baskets. We were all raised up together in the same part of town, and we were waiting together. For as long as we stood in the cold, they were uplifted and spirits were high. These are some good, strong women that just need a break. They come to my house and they sit there and wait for me to drop words of encouragement and I just tell them, ‘You just have to hang on in there.’”

Ernestine D., Witnesses to Hunger, Harrisburg
I Just Try to Do What’s Right

“My girls keep me going. I don’t want them to go through what I went through. I don’t want to say perfect, because nothing’s perfect, but I just want them to just have a perfect little upbringing. You know what I mean? I’m not promised any day, but I try to make the best out of what I can, and teach them as much as I can teach them, and what they need to know as far as living, life, bad things, good things, bad people, good people – I just try to do what’s right, what’s best for them.”

Juell F., Witnesses to Hunger, Boston

My Little One

“She’s only six. She just does what she has to do. She doesn’t complain, does not complain at all. That’s the way it is. Maybe I’m teaching her moral values to be a stronger person, or to say, ‘I’m never going to live like this.’ I hope so. I hope she has it in her head that I’m never going to ever, ever live like this, ever again in my life. When she gets older, I want her to grow up to be a better person.”

Joanna C., Witnesses to Hunger, Philadelphia
Living Wages and Family-Oriented Policies

Many families of Witnesses to Hunger struggle with low-wage work. Despite their hard work, too many are unable to cover all of their expenses to support themselves and their families. In many cases, families do not have paid family leave, meaning that when their child is sick, they are unable to take the time off to be with their child. The potential loss of wages or possibly their job means many Witnesses need to make an impossible choice between caring for their children and being able to pay their bills. Without living wages and workplace policies that support health, families cannot get ahead. They might remain stuck in the cycle of poverty.

When One Child is Sick

“When one child is sick, that means somebody has to stay home and take care of the child that’s not sick. That means: that’s money we’re missing. That means: do we pay the rent or do we pay the light bill?”

Tianna G., Witnesses to Hunger, Philadelphia

Family of Four

“I did not want to raise my kids in a project at all. We had no choice. It was either that or Children and Youth were going to take my kids. They said that, ‘You need to be out on your own two feet.’ Well, it’s kind of hard when you’re trying to raise four kids on minimum wage.”

Yvonne L., Witnesses to Hunger, Scranton
Calendar of Appointments for My Kids

“They talk about people who are on SSI and Welfare, and how they’re on Welfare just because they don’t want anything out of life. People are on it because sometimes they don’t have any other option. I really wanted to show this calendar and say, “Employment. Is it really possible? Do you know someone who will hire me when I need to take all these days off?”

Crystal S., Witnesses to Hunger, Philadelphia

Enjoying the Ride

“Looking back at this picture, I realized how much I hated to ride the T, but my son always seemed to enjoy the ride. He looked like he didn’t have a care in the world. It’s hard for me to do a lot with my son, because I’m always busy, and I barely see him. He goes to school, and I’m working. We don’t really have time in the middle, except for bedtime. I’m telling myself it’s only temporary, because I’m trying to get him stable.”

Iesha M., Witnesses to Hunger, Boston
Eliminate the Cliff Effect and Encourage Economic Stability

The cliff effect occurs when families start to become more financially self-sufficient, and they begin to earn a higher income. But before families have had a chance to build some savings, or pay outstanding bills, their benefits are cut, leaving them in a worse financial situation than before their income increased. For example, a mother who begins to work more hours and makes just slightly more income may find her childcare subsidies cut completely, leaving her unable to afford care for her children when she is at work. This gap between basic, every-day expenses and total family resources causes an economic shock to families. They can’t make a steady climb toward economic independence – instead, they “fall off a cliff” as they attempt to climb higher.

We need to fix the benefits system to create a more gradual decrease in government assistance. This would allow families to get a stronger, more stable footing as they continue to work, earn, and move up the economic ladder. We also need to encourage families to save money by removing asset limits and providing no-fee, low-cost savings accounts so they can build up their own personal safety net, and never need to turn to government assistance again.

It’s Like I Can’t Win

“I filed for disability for my daughter and of course that takes at least four to six months to even go through. So once I do that, then a lot of things will change. They will take my food stamps away so it’s like I can’t win. They give me the help with her, but at the same time they’re taking food out of my house because I have extra income, because they think that I have more because there’s more money coming in that I don’t need – my food stamps, as much as they give me, which is nowhere near true.”

Shaunte B., Witnesses to Hunger, Baltimore
City Hall

“I was on my way to an overtime job – they had called me to work there for one day. So I was walking past City Hall and thinking to myself, ‘Well, if I go into work this one extra day, are they going to cut my food stamps off? Was I going to get cut off again?’ I really didn’t know what to do. What can the city do to help us stay on the food stamp program when we do extra work? I don’t think it’s fair for us to get reprimanded for doing something positive.”

Imani S., Witnesses to Hunger, Philadelphia

Not Enough

“I got a $29 increase in my child support and they took $250 worth of food stamps from me. That little bit of food stamps that they give me is not enough for my household. I don’t know how they scale it, and however they figure out what a household should get. But whoever is in charge of the welfare system needs to recalculate that, because I don’t think that’s right.”

Anisa D., Witnesses to Hunger, Camden
Changing the Tone to Respect

Many families from Witnesses have discussed their frustrations with the overall experience of going to the county assistance offices. The process of applying for and maintaining benefits is often painful and frustrating. The technologies in place are outdated and inefficient; the case managers lack training in customer service and trauma education. These different facets of the welfare office perpetuate the degradation and dehumanization of families in poverty.

Witnesses also share their pain from hearing negative words said about people in poverty by their neighbors, the media, and legislators. Low-income families are often treated as lazy, dependent, and undeserving. This stereotyping is hurtful. We need to change the tone of our language around issues of poverty and hunger to better reflect our shared humanity and to encourage more respectful, informed dialogue throughout our country.

I’m Not Going to Lie

“He was asking the case worker for something to eat. If he was in day care I wouldn’t have to have lugged him early in the morning to an appointment to the welfare office to try to get food stamps and medical coverage. I can’t help it if my baby’s hungry. I was thinking, ‘I’m not going to lie to you miss, he’s hungry.’”

Imani S., Witnesses to Hunger, Philadelphia
**Oodles of Noodles**

“Come leave your world just for one week and live in my world. Tell me how you’re going to make it and survive; how emotionally, you’re going to keep yourself together. To day-by-day look at your kids and tell them, ‘I don’t have any money to take you to the store.’ Or, ‘We’re eating Oodles of Noodles today because the food stamps didn’t last.’”

Erica S., Witnesses to Hunger, Philadelphia

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**In the Welfare Office**

“I wish people would just look at you for who you are, and not treat you like they are superior, like you’re on a different level just because you need welfare. I’m so used to being let down. I’m so used to being disappointed. I’m so used to everything just crumbling down on me that I don’t ask for any help anymore.”

Barbie I., Witnesses to Hunger, Philadelphia
Conclusions

1) Create a comprehensive national plan to end hunger. This demands government and corporate accountability, involves the people who know hunger and poverty firsthand in all decision-making, and encourages public participation.
   a. Make no decision about people in poverty without having firsthand experts involved in the decision-making process.
   b. Create a poverty taskforce of legislators and people who are currently receiving government assistance to lead the development of the national plan.
   c. Work with government agencies, community-based organizations and the private sector to reframe the collective voice on poverty to reflect the many dimensions of poverty involving food, housing, energy, health, and education.

2) Encourage employers to provide living wages and family-oriented labor policies.
   a. Increase the minimum wage to a living wage.
   b. Give tax breaks to companies that provide stable, full-time employment.
   c. Incentivize companies to provide paid sick leave and family leave.

3) Restructure government assistance programs to prevent the cliff effect, allowing families to truly transition to self-sufficiency.
   a. Create a more gradual and coordinated decline in benefits to families working toward self-sufficiency.
   b. Encourage family savings by removing asset limits from assistance programs.
   c. Calculate income for a family over a longer period of time to account for income fluctuations found so frequently in part-time work.

4) Demand widespread culture change and accountability in the human services sector towards a culture of respect towards those seeking help.
   a. Implement trauma education into the training programs of all case managers and other employees of the public assistance programs.
   b. Improve the technology used throughout the welfare system in order to improve the work environment for case managers and ensure a more consistent, effective system for enrolling in and reapplying for benefits.
   c. Encourage schools, community-based organizations, and government agencies to engage in respectful dialogue around issues of poverty, race, ethnicity, gender and class in order to create a more thoughtful and informed generation of anti-poverty leaders.