

April 15, 2015

Keleigh Green-Patton

To the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
1301 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

My name is Keleigh Green-Patton and I am a product of SNAP.

Recently, I was promoted to a position that I believe represents a full circle moment in my life. As I think about my humble beginnings I realize how far I have come.

My sister and I grew up in a single parent home. My mother worked full-time as an administrative assistant, but it didn't pay much and she did the best she could to give us a good childhood. She made sure we were active by participating in free music classes, gymnastics and ice skating. My sister and I didn't know that, like thousands of other families, we could barely keep food in the house.

My mom received Food Stamps – the equivalent of SNAP at the time – the kind you tear out of the booklet. She was big on fruit, vegetables and beans so we always had that at home. She always insisted fresh was better. We never knew just how much she struggled to feed us. We never knew that it cost more to purchase an apple than to purchase noodles. But my mom knew we needed good food in order to grow and so she did the best she could with what she had. When the stamps ran out in the middle of the month, we visited our local church for food baskets. My sister and I were excited to receive whatever was in the box. We would carry the items so proudly as if we had just come from the store.

As a teenager, I became increasingly embarrassed about going to the church for food or paying for groceries with the paper stamps. If I saw people I knew at the store, I would wait until they left before I completed my purchase. If they didn't leave, I would pretend that I left my money at home, leaving the food behind.

Years later, I found myself as a single mother of two. At different times over four years, I needed Food Stamps to help feed my children. I was diligent about finding work. I worked both a full and part-time job later and was able to stop collecting SNAP benefits. I really needed my girls to see that hard work pays off, but I struggled to keep food on the table, even with two jobs.

Later, I married and had two more children. We were doing well, in our two parent, two income family. But we didn't make enough to save up for the future, because we lived paycheck to paycheck. Yet there was no need for assistance. We were happy and proud working Americans. But a little more than 11 years ago, I lost my \$12 per hour job when the candy factory I worked at closed. I searched hard for a new job, any job. I had a high school diploma but no college or advanced training. I needed skills that would last me a lifetime.

That's when I applied for Chicago's Community Kitchens, a workforce development program at the Greater Chicago Food Depository. My life has never been the same. The program gave me the culinary skills and the confidence I needed for a new career. But while the program had no monetary cost, I was still without income while I trained for three months.

To supplement the lack of income, I knew the only way to feed my family was to apply for food stamps. We received about \$400 a month for six people. When the stamps ran out, my local church was kind enough to give us food baskets. It was just enough to help support our family until we could be in a better position to support ourselves. It was just enough to bridge the gap before the end of the month. I didn't understand it when I was a teenager, but I understand now how important these benefits were and are to families like mine. I never wanted to be on Food Stamps, when I look back on it today, I'm glad it was there when we needed it.

It's now exactly ten years later and I'm still happily married with children. After graduating from Chicago's Community Kitchens, I gained employment with a catering company and eventually purchased a home. My career continued to advance when I started working in school foodservice. As I settle into my new position of District Manager for Chartwells, I'm proud to say not only can I afford to feed my family, but we always have nutritious food in the house. I also can afford to send my children to college. I work for a great company whose philosophy is Eat Learn Live and I've had the opportunity to pay it forward in several ways. I've been able to offer internships and jobs to many Chicago's Community Kitchens graduates. On a monthly basis, I volunteer at my church and we provide a free hot meal to anyone who needs it in our community.

I'm so thankful to have the opportunity to testify before you today. As a child, Food Stamps kept me and my sister from going hungry. As an adult, Food Stamps allowed me to feed my children while I invested in my own future. Without this program, I wouldn't have been able to start my new career. Many people call SNAP a safety net, but for me it was like a trampoline – bouncing my family back into work and a brighter future.

I am proud to represent the millions of families across the United States who have benefited from SNAP. On behalf of households who need SNAP now and in the future, I ask you to protect this important program. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Keleigh Green-Patton