

WAYS & MEANS SUBCOMMITTEE TESTIMONY

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for inviting me to this remote hearing of the Subcommittee on Select Revenue Measures, and thank you for holding this hearing.

My name is Tom Colicchio. You may know me as the Head Judge on Top Chef, or as a chef and restaurateur. But I'm here today in a different capacity. I am a father and a citizen who cares deeply about our nation's wellbeing. Today I am here to discuss the urgent need for Senate Republicans to pass the HEROES act, which would significantly help this nation's eaters, a category we all fall into, whether Republican or Democrat, red state or blue.

In order to respond to this pandemic effectively, it is critically important that we understand exactly where this nation was beforehand:

- Before COVID-19, while some in the current administration were trumpeting about our great economy, the U.S. had **37 million people struggling with hunger. 37 Million people.**
- Before COVID-19, 13 million children routinely went without sufficient healthy calories to power them through a day of learning and growing, despite the data from pediatricians that inadequate nutrition during a child's earliest years has irreversible consequences in the form of educational deficits and illness through her lifespan.
- Before COVID-19, 38 Million Americans relied upon the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, just to get the very basics onto their tables. The average SNAP benefit amounted to a meager \$1.34 per meal.
- Before COVID-19 30 Million children in the U.S. relied on free or reduced-price school meals for adequate nutrition each day, creating a crisis for their families on weekends and during the summer.
- Before COVID-19, our nation shamefully — and uniquely among wealthy, 1st world economies — allowed states to erect onerous bureaucratic roadblocks to receiving food assistance — even fingerprinting — as if to add a layer of deliberate difficulty and shame to the struggle to feed one's kids.

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Even prior to COVID-19, it was not uncommon to see hungry Americans lining up at 24-hour convenience stores at 11:59 pm on the last day of the month, with their babies and children in tow, waiting for midnight when their EBT card would be replenished and they could buy something to give their children for breakfast the next morning.

Some might witness that and think, *“What kind of a parent brings their toddler to a 7-11 at midnight?”*

I ask you, *“What kind of a parent sleeps well at night, knowing another parent **anywhere**, must resort to that? What kind of leaders vote year after year to keep food assistance at such*

low numbers that any child must suffer hunger pangs and life-long medical and psychological consequences?”

And that was all before COVID-19.

The pandemic has left close to 14 Million people unemployed almost overnight. Millions of Americans are newly poor and hungry.

- School meals that were a lifeline for hungry families ended when schools closed and as a result, child hunger has soared.
- **20% of all households with children report facing hunger.**
- Millions of Seniors lost access to the meals they received at senior centers and are unable to afford to stockpile the groceries they need while sheltering at home.
- According to Joel Berg at Hunger Free America, overall hunger has **doubled** during the pandemic.

Now we see images of cars in mile-long lines, snaking slowly along on freeways for hours to pick up charity food. The Salvation Army reports that their drive-through pantries have seen **an 84% increase since May.**

What that tells us is that in the United States of America you can go from being someone who helps out at a food pantry, to someone who needs one, in a matter of weeks.

For decades we have foisted this problem onto food banks and charities, who were unable to meet the massive need even before COVID. **Fixing hunger in this country with charity food is like putting out a raging forest fire with a couple hook and ladders and a bucket brigade.**

Only the Federal Government can fully address the scale of our current hunger problem.

Recently, Sen John Cornyn of Texas visited a food bank and tweeted out a call for donations by saying, “Texas Food Banks Need Our Help!”

Let’s get this straight — in the midst of an historic hunger crisis, Senator Cornyn — who along with Senator Mitch McConnell has failed to pass a bill which would meaningfully address hunger at the federal level — is calling upon everyday Americans to make up for the Senate’s inaction. I have news for you, Senator Cornyn. It’s not the food banks that need the help. IT’S THE PEOPLE THEY FEED THAT DO. And helping the people of this country is YOUR JOB.

On May 16, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the HEROES Act, that addressed this crisis in critically important ways. It included a 15 percent increase in benefits nationwide, which raises the average meal allocation by 20 cents. Doesn’t sound like much, but it is a meaningful increase to a family that needs it. Most importantly, the HEROES Act would provide families with direct support, so they can shop for groceries with dignity, for culturally appropriate foods, rather than waste hours in degrading and demoralizing lines waiting for a box of processed charity food to be put into their trunk.

Since May, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has refused to pass the bill, describing it as “blue state bailouts,” despite the data showing that hunger is at crisis levels in red states and throughout rural America.

It is bad enough that our nation has knowingly allowed hunger to grow in a flush, pre-pandemic economy. But the opposition to extending a lifeline with food support during the worst health and hunger crisis in modern times is frankly, morally abhorrent. It’s wrong. It is also economic suicide. Federal nutrition programs can help youngsters stay in school and keep their health on track so they can become productive, contributing members of our society one day. To ignore this fact is to shrug at the very future of this nation.

Ladies and Gentlemen of this Subcommittee: This is the moment we need to start putting our money where our mouths are. Literally.

During the COVID-19 health and economic crisis, this Congress should use all the tools in their toolbox to make sure that our nation’s children don’t continue to go hungry.

- We MUST increase SNAP benefits immediately by 15% to give family greater purchasing power now. Families need more money in their pockets so they can walk into a grocery store and buy the food they need with dignity. No American should have to waste hours on line with their children, waiting for a handout. It is degrading and unfair;
- We MUST SUSPEND SNAP time limits and the Trump administration’s unconscionable attempts to limit eligibility in the midst of a pandemic.
- We MUST approve requests from states for authority to use Disaster SNAP to help respond to COVID-19 and give states the flexibility they need to operate remotely, for a sufficient duration to cover the full economic impacts of COVID-19;
- We MUST increase food access points for SNAP participants during the pandemic;
- We MUST allow purchases of hot prepared foods from SNAP retailers and work with states on greater utilization of the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program.
- We MUST increase Pandemic EBT so that families will get the equivalent value of school meals to spend on their children if schools have to close;
- We MUST NOT count Pandemic Unemployment Compensation or other COVID-19 related unemployment insurance against SNAP income eligibility;
- We MUST extend flexibilities for schools to serve meals through the end of the school year. Currently, summer meal waivers that allow schools to adjust where and how they serve hungry children are set to expire on December 31st. USDA needs to immediately extend the waivers through the *entire school year*. School districts cannot operate the child nutrition programs under such uncertainty;
- We MUST extend flexibilities for WIC providers to provide remote services to keep new mothers and babies safe during the pandemic. Without this, new mothers, babies and young children will have to risk their health and safety by going to local WIC clinics in-person, which are often used as sites for COVID-19 testing;
- We MUST increase funding for Meals on Wheels through the Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program, which will keep seniors healthy and connected to their communities;

Ladies and Gentlemen of this subcommittee, this crisis is not about a lack of food. The United States produces more than enough food for everyone in this country and helps to feed the entire world. **The devastating hunger levels we are seeing today are the inevitable symptom of a callous and short-sighted political system that for decades has enabled the luckiest and best-connected few to prosper wildly while millions of Americans lack the income to purchase adequate, healthy food for their families.** This is not a new problem created by COVID-19, but a longstanding one made exponentially worse by the pandemic, one that has democratized scarcity and suffering in ways no one imagined.

It is not too late to turn this around. I urge the Senate to act swiftly, compassionately and comprehensively to this crisis.

Thank you for addressing this vital issue, and for hearing what I had to say.