Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

I thank you for your invitation to appear today as you consider the health and economic costs of hunger in America. Although I have appeared before this and other Committees on many occasions over the years, I must begin with the bottom line: The United States is quite unique among industrial democracies because we let so many of our people go hungry, and we seem to be doing precious little to close this gap. Year after year the Department reports that about 35 million Americans live in households that do not have enough to eat. What was once termed a "hunger epidemic" in our nation has now become a continuing fact of life. We are letting this problem remain pretty much the same from year to year. Clearly we can do better, and I applaud you for holding this hearing to exercise the leadership to make a difference.

Before I turn to the results of our study of the cost burden of hunger, I will begin by reviewing what science knows about the health and cognitive effects of hunger—what it does to the minds and bodies of both children and adults. Some of this information may be new to you, even to the two Members who also are physicians by training.

Two or three decades ago I used to teach my public health and medical students that while hunger impacts one's health status, it seldom had an effect on the brain. We now know that this is not true. Science now knows that there is no "safe" level of hunger: when a child is forced to go without enough to eat her body suffers and her brain function is impaired. The same is true for adults, particularly the vulnerable elderly. This is because the body and the brain require sufficient food energy to function adequately. When it is not there, even temporarily, the body and mind cannot function properly. Just as your car cannot run without the proper fuel, so too is the mind impaired when it goes without its own fuel.

A child sitting in the classroom without a breakfast does not have the cognitive capacity to take part in the educational process. Her body is in the classroom but her mind is not fueled to learn. This is because when the body does not have enough nourishment, even on a short-term basis, it goes into triage. Just like triage on the battlefield, the body must decide how to allocate its insufficient resources. Its first priority is to use whatever energy there is to maintain critical organ function. Its next priority, if there is enough nutrient energy, is to maintain health. Its final priority is for brain function. As my colleague Carl Sagan bluntly put it when we discussed these new research findings, "better dumb than dead." That child in the class may be present in body but she came through the schoolhouse door too impaired to learn—not because she is dumb but

because she suffers cognitive impairment due to lack of nutrition. In short, science now knows that hunger, not just in its absolute state but even in the form of chronically "mild" under-nutrition, produces startling effects in both the mind and body. While true for both adults and children, most of the research has focused on the young because we can more easily track their growth and educational patterns. Children without enough to eat:

- Get sick more frequently, particularly in terms of preventable outcomes such headaches, stomachaches and colds,
- They have more difficulty overcoming illnesses once they occur,
- They miss school more often due to these illnesses,
- They have more behavioral disorders, such as aggressiveness and classroom disruption, as well as sullen and withdrawn behavior, and
- They do less well in terms of their grades and do more poorly on standardized test scores than do similar children who get enough to eat.

It is in the context of these poorer health, behavioral and mental outcomes that the Sodexo Foundation commissioned me, along with three other scholars, to assess their cost to the nation. In other words, how much more money do we pay in terms of illness, poor educational outcomes and lost productivity than we would if no one went hungry in America. I am joined today by one of my colleagues in this research, Dr. Don Shepard, an economist from Brandeis University, who has done similar cost burden analyses, recently one commissioned by the United Nations regarding the cost of dengue fever. Sodexo, known for its corporate interest not only charitable responses to hunger but to informed policy responses to help end hunger altogether, funded our interdisciplinary team from three major universities. Parenthetically, I should mention that none of us receives a salary from Sodexo, and the Foundation played no role whatsoever in our research or its outcomes.

When people go hungry it costs the nation in a variety of ways, some of which are not easily measurable. We dismissed cost areas for which calculations were too difficult, and focused instead on four key cost arenas that are more easily measurable, that is, where the scientific literature is sufficient to develop cost burdens that are both reasonable and conservative. The first of these is charity. It is said that "there is no free lunch." Somebody, somewhere, pays. Charity operates the same way, and hunger charities exist throughout the country, in each of your districts and in virtually every community in the nation. More than 300 food banks exist, covering every state and averaging six to a state (although they are not that equally distributed). These food banks provide nutritional and other commodities to more than 50,000 soup kitchens and food pantries. These food banks and local charities have to rent or purchase offices, warehouses, freezers, trucks and related materials. They have to have full-time, paid staff, and their work is supplemented by literally thousands upon thousands of volunteers who often spend from several hours to a day or two a week helping to feed the hungry. Each of these activities, even among volunteers, has a cost. We figured out what it is. This enormous charitable enterprise comes to more than $14.5 billion each year.

We next turn to the excess cost of illness, that is, illness that is associated with hunger over and above the typical levels that occur in the population(s). We did this for both mental health services and for medical and other forms of health care. You might be interested in how we did this. As indicated earlier, we know that food-deprived groups have higher rates of ill health: iron deficiency occurs at a rate that is 1.66 times more

likely; activity-limiting health impairments are nearly three times as high; headaches nearly twice as high; and nutrient deficiencies from three to four times normal levels. In terms of mental health outcomes, particularly in children, depression is 3.5 times higher than among non-hungry children; the need for special education twice as high; and general psychosocial dysfunction is seven times as high. As you're probably beginning to see, it costs far less to feed children than it is to let them go hungry and par a higher price after-the-fact. I will go no further now in terms of how we attributed actual costs of these adverse outcomes, but Dr. Shepard and I can take questions, or you can refer to the detailed methodology in our research report. What is worth noting now is that the health-related costs of hunger come to nearly $67 billion annually. And please bear in mind that the actual costs certainly are higher, quite a bit higher, because of our conservative methodology. This is because for some outcomes, say Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), the research literature is insufficient to develop likelihood ratios for excess outcomes. For yet other outcomes, we had adequate data to compute direct costs but not for indirect ones. It is the responsibility of researchers to be careful—conservative—and it is for this reason that we know our estimate of $67 billion a year does not capture the full cost in this arena.

The final cost arena is the limited education and lowered workforce productivity that is associated with having too little nourishment. According to a number of studies in this field, children from food insecure homes are more likely than their non-hungry peers to do less well on tests of mental ability and overall school performance. They miss school 50% more; they get suspended about twice as often; and they have to repeat more grades. They also are less likely to complete high school. As a result, children so affected face greater likelihood of unemployment or limited employment; poor judgment and lowered job performance; and, as a result, lowered workforce productivity. The cost of this productivity loss comes to $9.2 billion annually.

When we add the costs of each of these arenas (more than $14 billion for charity; nearly $67 billion for illness; and almost $10 billion in lowered education and productivity) we pay a rather staggering bill for hunger-- more than $90 billion each year. This is enough to get our attention, although I stress again that the actual cost is clearly higher than this, due to our utilization of conservative research techniques and lack of sufficient data for some outcomes known to be associated with hunger.

While this bill, sort of an additional tax on the American public, is not evenly distributed across the population, it means that a typical household in our country pays $500 a year. While this bill often is not direct, it shows up in terms of higher taxes to cover the costs of outcomes that the victims of hunger suffer. It also is paid in terms of charitable contributions and related tax deductions, as well as lowered workforce productivity and competitiveness in the international market system.

By contrast to this $90 billion annual cost, it recently was estimated that we could virtually end hunger in America if we increased spending for existing nutrition programs (food stamps, school meals, summer feeding and elderly feeding) by about $12 billion a year over current spending. (The very recent jump in food and fuel costs may now make this calculation somewhat higher).

Former nutrition advisor to President Nixon, Dr. Jean Mayer, once noted that "of all the dumb ways to save money, not feeding children is the dumbest." While I prefer to speak

a slightly different language than his remarkable clarity, our economics are clear: our nation pays far more to let hunger exist than it would cost us to eliminate it.

Thank you.

Copies of the research analysis, The Economic Cost of Domestic Hunger: Estimated Annual Burden to the United States*, is available to download by going to www.sodexofoundation.com. For further information from the researchers, email: lbrown@hsph.harvard.edu; shepard@brandeis.edu; martin@brandeis.edu; and orwat@loyola.edu.This research initiative was sponsored by Sodexo Foundation, which has been working to eliminate the root causes of hunger since 1996. Its work also includes a broad menu of child feeding programs (summer and school year), and disaster response initiatives such as Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf Coast.*