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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE AGRICULTURE SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS, OVERSIGHT, NUTRITION AND FORESTRY

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Mother Teresa – in her *Essential Wisdom* – wrote, “I once picked up a small girl who was wandering the streets, lost. Hunger was written all over her face. Who knows how long it had been since she had eaten anything! I offered her a piece of bread. The little one started eating, crumb by crumb. I told her, ‘Eat, eat the bread! Aren’t you hungry?’ She looked at me and said, ‘I am just afraid that when I run out of bread, I’ll still be hungry.’”

We know that Mother Teresa touched the lives of millions of children in India, here in the United States, and all around the world. Her story about the hungry little girl could be about a child in Calcutta, but sadly enough, it also could easily be about a child in Alabama. More specifically, a child in southwest Alabama, where I work and oversee the administration of the state’s Food Stamp Program to the citizens of Baldwin County.

Baldwin County is the largest county geographically in Alabama, and is the second fastest growing in population. Our county is located on the Gulf of Mexico and is the largest county for tourist industry and potential jobs in this industry in the state. Many families and children benefit from the state’s Food Stamp Program in Baldwin County. However, about six months ago, in studying the growth of our population, and from feedback from our state officials, we realized there were an unserved number of citizens whom we were failing to reach with the benefits of the program. We began an outreach program to better serve our citizens by working with our agency partners, the schools, our local staff in other programs, etc. to be sure applications were made available in various agencies and that people were assisted in completing the applications. In just a few short months, we were able to increase the county’s participation by an additional 10%. We have continued to work toward our goals of reducing hunger and providing better nutrition for children and their families by these means, and other ideas we continue to explore. There is much more that needs to be done to further simplify the program in order to encourage more families with children to access the benefits.

From my twenty-eight (28) years of social work in Alabama, I come before you today to testify that the Food Stamp Program has been a God-send to many hungry children in our state. It is the largest benefit program in the Department of Human Resources. The program is designed to supplement the basic food needs of low-income households and our working poor. It also increases the family’s food buying power, and improves the nutrition and health of many adults and children. We are all aware of the emphasis that is placed on healthy eating and a healthy lifestyle. It is very important that our low-income families have access to programs that supplement their ability to make wise choices for their family and “put food on their table.” Currently our state has nearly 514,000 people receiving benefits, and of this number over 278,000 are children, making them the largest population receiving food stamps in Alabama.

It is said repeatedly that our children, all across our nation, are our greatest resource. We have worked very hard in Alabama to make the needs of children a priority as evidenced by the many improvements in our child welfare programs over the past two decades. We realize the value of the Food Stamp Program as it helps to

contribute to family stability. The ability of a family to feed their children and provide proper nutrition to them keeps many families off the child welfare neglect rolls, thereby strengthening our families in Alabama.

The 2002 Farm Bill brought about significant, positive changes that improved and simplified the delivery of the Food Stamp Program to our citizens. However, there continue to be areas that need further strengthening.

Federal funding for the Food Stamp Program must keep pace with the daily increasing needs and the ever-increasing cost of providing a healthful diet for our families and our children. Also, funding for companion programs for education and nutrition should be increased. Including nutrition education as a viable program thrust has aided our families in Alabama tremendously by educating them on how to select healthy foods for themselves and their children. We applaud programs such as Team Nutrition, Program Nutrition Education, Eat Smart – Play Hard, School Breakfast Program, National School Lunch Program, Summer Food Service Program, and many others as they support the goal of providing better nutrition for our children.

Many of you will recall the Hurricane of 1979 – Hurricane Frederick. I began my career seven weeks after Frederick hit the Alabama Gulf Coast. While I was assigned to the Child Welfare Program, I will never forget observing the greatest need of our citizens in rural southwest Alabama at that time – the need for food. Sure there were sheltering issues, job issues, financial issues, but the first and greatest need was the NEED FOR FOOD. Almost thirty years later, that basic need has not changed for our families and their children.

Chairman Baca, Congressman Bonner, and members of this committee, thank you for this opportunity to share with you my thoughts on the Food Stamp Program and its impact on our children in ALABAMA.

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