

**Testimony of Gary Brunk
Executive Director
Kansas Action for Children
Topeka, Kansas**

**Before the House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and
Forestry**

**“The Federal Food Stamp Program
and its Impact on Children’s Nutrition and Health”**

10:00 AM

Tuesday, March 13, 2007

**1032 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished committee members:

I come before you in the shadow of several Wheat State political leaders who have fought hunger over the last decades through the Food Stamp program.

No state has done more in the U.S. Congress to strengthen the Food Stamp Program, our nation’s first line of defense against hunger.

Senator Bob Dole, one of the principle architects of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, took a program that existed largely as an add-on to public assistance and opened it to the working poor, the temporarily unemployed, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

Representative Keith Sebelius helped craft the House version of Senator Dole’s legislation.

Representative Dan Glickman helped write important legislation that protected and strengthened the program.

And in the mid-1990s then-Representative Pat Roberts led an effort to preserve the integrity of the program's structure. Later, as Senator, he worked to restore food stamp cuts made in 1996 that he believed went too far.

Historians among you will note that Kansas’ food stamp champions came from both political parties. That too is a legacy of Senator Dole, who in the late 70’s worked with Democratic Senator George McGovern to improve the food stamp law.

Their bipartisan friendship continued when, in 2005, Dole, McGovern and Donald E. Messer, a Methodist theologian, wrote *Ending Hunger Now: A Challenge to Persons of Faith*. The book mentions that the senators also collaborated to champion school lunch programs and supplemental nutrition programs for women, infants and children.

The authors give an important clue about the values that brought them together in this book. "Every religious tradition," they write, "emphasizes caring for children."

The connection Senators Dole and McGovern make between caring for children and eliminating hunger explain why, as director of a Kansas child advocacy organization, I am here.

Let me tell you about children in Kansas today. In many ways Kansas is a terrific place to be a child. Year in and year out we do well in cross-state comparisons of child well-being. Kansas ranks 12th in that regard, according to the *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, a widely used compilation of statistics about children.

Whenever I talk about how we rank, I immediately follow with two very large "howevers."

The first "however" is that we've achieved our high-ranking in comparison to states *within a nation that does not itself compare well with most other industrialized nations*. For example, as regards childhood poverty, the United States compares poorly with the world's economically developed nations.

My second "however" is that we need always remember that no matter where our state places in a ranking, a significant number of Kansas children live with economic insecurity. And the odds are stacked against them.

Of all our children, 14.6 percent live in families with incomes below the poverty level. Another 20 percent live in families with incomes below 200 percent of poverty. City setting or countryside, it makes little difference. The child poverty rate in thinly settled Kansas "frontier counties" is about the same as in urban areas – 15 percent. Densely settled rural counties fare worst, with poverty affecting about 17 percent of their children.

One of the consequences of poverty is that about 12 percent of Kansas households – 133,000 - are food insecure, meaning that their lack of resources makes them uncertain about access to food. For many of the children in these families, food stamps are the most important protection from persistent hunger. In Kansas, 183,000 persons depend on Food Stamps and almost half of them are children. Of those children, 76,000 live in poverty, 41,000 in extreme poverty.

Of course when I say the Food Stamp Program protects thousands of Kansas children from hunger I'm talking about more than the discomfort or pain that comes of missing meals, bad as those consequences are.

Others appearing at this hearing can speak with more authority about the radiant effects of hunger. A brief summary would note that hungry children are more likely to have behavioral and emotional problems. They are less likely to perform well in school. Hungry children are more likely to struggle with obesity. They are less likely to be in the full bloom of health.

The effects of hunger are especially devastating for small children. Brain and child development research has focused increasing attention on life's earliest years. When things go right, this is a period of phenomenal cognitive and physical growth that lays the foundation for successful adulthood. When things go wrong, the foundation is weakened, and the negative consequences multiply.

Children for whom much has gone wrong are likely to start behind their peers and to stay there.

The trickle-down of poverty and hunger acts, cumulatively, like a slow poison. Food stamps help protect against that poison. The Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP) calls the Food Stamp program "one of America's best medicines" because the nutrition it provides improve children's health, decreases hospitalizations, and optimizes mental, social and emotional development.

I come to you today with a sense of urgency about keeping the Kansas medicine chest stocked with the remedy we call food stamps. In my view, it is imperative that Congress strengthen the nutrition title of the Farm Bill by improving the food stamp program.

The number of food stamp recipients in the Wheat State has grown by more than 50,000 in five years. My friends at the Catholic Charities Food Pantry in Wichita, who served around 6,500 clients in 2001, tell me that the number was 10,500 four years later. People come to them once a month to take away a supply of food good for two or three days. Increasing numbers of these folks, I'm told, are working-poor families. This reflects the inadequate levels of benefits provided in the Food Stamp program.

That leads me to four recommendations for strengthening the Food Stamp Program.

The first is this. I'd like to encourage improving the food stamp benefit. In Kansas, the benefit is 95 cent per person per meal. How can that level of benefit purchase an adequate diet, given other claims on household income? It's

not enough for basics, let alone a healthy nutritious diet. But not only is the benefit level insufficient, for many families it is actually eroding.

As a result of benefit cuts enacted as part of the 1996 welfare law, the purchasing power of most households' food stamp benefit is eroding in value each year. Food Stamp Program budget calculations allow households to subtract a "standard deduction" from their income, to reflect the basic costs of housing, utilities, transportation, and other inescapable living expenses. The standard deduction represents a portion of household income that is not available to purchase food because it must be used for other necessities.

Prior to 1996, the standard deduction was indexed each year to account for inflation, in recognition of the fact that basic living expenses rise with inflation. The 1996 welfare law, however, froze the standard deduction at \$134 for all household sizes. In the 2002 Farm Bill, Congress improved the standard deduction to help address the needs of larger households. The standard deduction remains frozen at \$134 a month, however, for households with three or fewer members.

In 2008, food stamp benefits for a typical working parent with two children will be about \$37 a month lower than they would have been without the across-the-board benefit cuts included in the 1996 law. That is 13 million dollars less for Kansans to spend on food in FY2008 alone, and 168 million dollars in lost benefits between FY 2008 and FY2017. By 2017, a typical working parent of two will, over the course of a year, miss out on more than one and a half months-worth of food stamps, compared to the amount of benefits she or he would have received under the law in place prior to 1996. Under current rules, this lost ground will never be recovered.

To restore the purchasing power of food stamp benefits, the standard deduction needs to be raised from \$134 to \$188 in 2008 and annually adjusted for inflation. A typical household of three or fewer members would see its benefits increase by about \$24 a month. This would not restore benefits to the levels they would have been without the 1996 law because of the cut in the maximum benefit, but much of the lost ground would be recovered. I realize that this would be very expensive, but even a partial fix would make a big difference to people trying to put food on the table.

One way to begin stopping the erosion of benefits is to improve the proposal enacted in 2002 and raise the standard deduction from 8.31 percent of the poverty line to 10 percent, as the Administration proposed in 2002. This would increase benefits right away for households of three or more people. Going from 8.31% to 10% would mean that in FY17 a typical working household of 3 would have about \$11 more per month (in real terms) than it would have received under current law. Households of two would start to see an increase ten years earlier than under current law. Virtually *all* of the increased benefits in the first five years

would go to families with children. (Over time, households of one and two would benefit as well.) At a minimum, Congress should ensure that benefits don't continue erode in value. The problem should stop in 2007.

Secondly, only about two out of three of those who are eligible for food stamps in Kansas are getting them. It's not just working-poor families who are eligible but not receiving them, but legal immigrants and seniors, too. I hope your committee will look for ways to simplify and streamline enrollment so state agencies can serve eligible households.

The 2002 farm bill reduced paperwork and office-visit requirements for working-poor households. The same allowance should be made for household that include elderly or disabled members. The 2002 provision that allowed people to apply for the food stamp program over the Internet should be expanded so that they also can apply by telephone. Finally, Congress should give states the ability to coordinate food stamps with other programs that support those with low income, as well as supporting state efforts to use technology improvements and business models to help with program access and to realize administrative savings.

Third, I would like to endorse a proposal in the President's budget: adjusting food stamps more accurately to reflect high child care costs. Tens of thousands of working families in Kansas do not have child care subsidies and have to pay out of pocket for child care cost. The Administration's proposal would allow working families with high child care costs to deduct the full cost of that care from households' income when determining their food stamp benefits. Right now that amount is capped at \$160 per month per child for children over 2 (\$200 per month per child for younger children.) This proposal helps those families with child care costs above those amounts.

The choice of paying for food or buying safe quality child care for your kids is no choice that a working poor parent should have to make. This proposal won't fully fix the problem of too little funding for child care, but it will ease the ripple effects of that serious problem.

Finally, I'd urge you to expanding access to legal immigrants and poor households that have modest savings. The legal bar facing these parents now has implications for children born citizens here. Please note that 16% of children under 150% of poverty in Kansas have an immigrant parent. Serving these children and their families is critical to a comprehensive solution to child poverty in Kansas.

I believe stopping the erosion of benefits, simplifying enrollment, making adjustments for child care costs, and expanding access moves us closer to the goal of eliminating hunger in America. On this committee are two Kansans, Representative Moran and Representative Boyda, a Republican and a Democrat.

My challenge to them is to emulate the bi-partisan example set by Senators Dole and McGovern in the fight against hunger. That is also my challenge to all of you.

GARY BRUNK

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Lawrence, Kansas 66049
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785-842-8196 (home)

Current Position: Executive Director, Kansas Action for Children, Inc., September 1996-present

During my tenure at Kansas Action for Children the organization has grown from a staff of one full-time and two-half time positions with an annual budget of \$90,000 to a full-time staff of ten and a budget of over \$1.5 million. In the course of that development KAC has become recognized as the most important independent advocate for children in the state.

My responsibilities include development of a long-term strategic framework and yearly public policy agenda; representing KAC in state-level committees, legislative hearings and to the news media; community outreach and network building; developing and maintaining relations with key funders; liaison with national organizations; and working closely with the President and other members of the Board of Directors to set the overall direction of KAC.

Previous Professional Experience

Executive Director, The Corporation for Change, Topeka, Kansas, January 1995-August 1996

Director of Model Projects, The Corporation for Change, Topeka, Kansas, 1994

Director for Administration and International Programs, Beach Center on Families and Disability, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 1988-1994

Transition Training Specialist, Transition Training Project, Kansas University Affiliated Facility, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 1985-1987

Program Director, Wisconsin Action Coalition, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1981-1984

Community Organizer and Trainer, Community Action Commission, Madison, Wisconsin, 1979-1981

Co-Founder and Community Organizer, People United for Responsible Energy. Madison, Wisconsin, 1974-1976

Trainer and Consultant, Center for Conflict Resolution, Madison, Wisconsin, 1972-1974

Caseworker, Department of Public Assistance, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1970-1971

Education

Master in Public Administration, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, December 1993

Bachelor of Arts (History), Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio, June 1970

Languages

Fluent in Spanish

Honors

Kansas Health Foundation Fellow, 1999

Inducted into Pi Alpha Alpha, Honors Society for Public Administration graduate students, 1990

Award for Efforts on Behalf of Persons with Disabilities, Kansas Committee for Self-Advocacy. Rock Springs, Kansas, 1986

Outstanding Services Award, Wisconsin Action Coalition, Madison, Wisconsin, 1984

Board and Committee Membership

Immunize Kansas Kids Steering Committee, 2006

Child Health Advisory Committee (appointed by Governor Kathleen Sebelius), 2006

Healthy Kansans 2010 Steering Committee, 2005

Health Care Consumers Coalition Executive Committee, 2005-present

Systems of Care Statewide Steering Committee, 2004-present

Kansas Enrichment Network Executive Committee, 2003-present (chair, 2003-2005)

Governor's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Immunizations, 2004

National KIDS COUNT Network Steering Committee, 2001-2004 (chair, 2004)

Essential Elements Project Advisory Committee (National Association of Child Advocates), 2001-2002

Douglas County Citizen's Review Board, 2000-2005

Board of Directors, Douglas County Victim and Offenders Reconciliation Program, 1999-2002

Commission of Children and Family Services Continuous Quality Improvement Council, 1998-2002

Kansas Supreme Court Task Force on Permanency Planning, 1996-2000

Kansas Early Childhood Care and Education Advisory Committee, 1996-present

Kansas Children's Coalition Executive Committee, 1996-2000 (Chair, July 1997-June 1999)

Research Workgroup of the Governor's Committee on Children and Families, 1998-1999

Board of Directors, Kansas Federation for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 1987-1990

Advisor, Board of Directors of the Self-Advocates Coalition of Kansas, 1986-1988

Advisor, Board of Directors of United Together, 1985-1990

Public Member, Special Wisconsin Legislative Council Committee on Interstate Taxation, 1982-1983

Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2004.

Name: Gary Brunk
Address: 720 SW Jackson St., Ste. 201, Topeka, KS 66603
Telephone: 785-232-0550
Organization you represent (if any): Kansas Action for Children

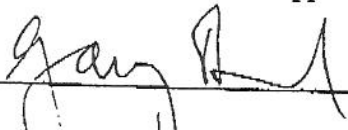
1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do NOT require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: _____ Amount: _____
Source: _____ Amount: _____

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: _____ Amount: _____
Source: _____ Amount: _____

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: X

Signature: 

* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.