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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement

Ranking Member Brenda Lawrence (MI-14)

Subcommittee on the Interior

Hearing on “SNAP: Examining Efforts to Combat Fraud and Improve Program Integrity”

June 9, 2016

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to thank our witnesses for being here today.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is our country’s most important and effective tool at fighting hunger. In 2015, there were over 45 million SNAP participants. While this number sounds extremely high, the Great Recession drove many to depend on SNAP.

My home state of Michigan was hard hit by the recession, and SNAP was there to help. Michigan received over \$2.5 billion in SNAP benefits, 198% higher than the national average – and 1.68 million residents depend on SNAP benefits to survive. In my district, 49% of SNAP participants were in families with children; 27% were in families with someone who is elderly; and 48% were working families.

SNAP is not easy to get. The average monthly benefit is \$126.83 per person—that is less than \$32 per week, per person. Recipients must go through a rigorous application process where they must meet specific qualifications and prove their eligibility. SNAP recipients must reapply every 6 to 12 months, and inform the state if their income changes. There are even minimum periods of disqualification ranging from one to six months, which may be increased by the state SNAP agency. States even have the option to disqualify the entire household for up to 180 days, if the household head fails to comply with work requirements.

I would like to enter into the record the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Assistance Application Information Booklet, which includes the type of forms families have to fill out to even get public assistance.

SNAP benefits can only be used to purchase approved food items sold by authorized SNAP retailers. There is a restaurant option for populations that have difficulty preparing food, such as the elderly and veterans, in a few states, including California, Arizona, and Michigan.

Allegations of fraud and abuse are much overblown. SNAP has one of the lowest fraud rates of any federal program. Over the past several years, USDA has taken aggressive steps to improve SNAP oversight and work with states on rooting out waste. USDA has seen declines in the rate of trafficking from four percent down to a little over one percent of benefits over the last 20 years.

While no amount of fraud, waste or abuse is acceptable, we must not throw the baby out with the bath water. You would not shut off the water for an entire county because a few households leave their hoses on all day. You would not stop buying groceries because your eldest son drinks up all the milk. We should not make the majority suffer for the few bad apples.

But that is exactly what the Republicans intend to do. This year Speaker Ryan's Task Force on Poverty, Opportunity, and Mobility is proposing to transform SNAP into a block grant. Their 2017 budget calls for eliminating another block grant of social services for children and the elderly. I worry that some future Republican budget will call for eliminating the block grant they are now trying to put SNAP into.

SNAP feeds millions of children, seniors, and people with disabilities—including veterans. SNAP is efficiently run. If SNAP did not exist, we would have to create a program to do what SNAP does.

Thank you.

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