

Testimony, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture John Weidman, Deputy Executive Director of The Food Trust, February 16, 2017

Thank you, Chairman Conaway and Ranking Member Peterson, for inviting me to testify. My name is John Weidman, and I am the Deputy Executive Director of The Food Trust, a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit that works nationally to improve access to healthy food. This year, through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, we have launched the Center for Healthy Food Access — a national collaborative effort aimed at improving the health of children. I am here today to talk about the strategies The Food Trust has been employing to improve health and encourage healthy eating among SNAP participants.

We believe that to have the greatest impact it takes a comprehensive approach that includes access, education, and incentives. In Pennsylvania, we have been improving access by opening farmers markets, working with corner stores to stock healthier products, and incentivizing new supermarket development. Our team of nutrition educators is providing engaging programming through SNAP-Ed to teach children and adults how to eat healthy, cook, and shop on a budget. And we run a successful Food Bucks program that provides \$2 worth of free produce for every \$5 spent with SNAP at farmers markets and a local supermarket.

Based on research, this comprehensive approach is working. A peer-reviewed study published in the journal *Pediatrics* found that our SNAP-Ed program reduced childhood overweight by 50%.¹ More recently, data collected on the BMI of Philadelphia children is showing that after decades of rising childhood obesity rates, we are finally seeing them drop.² The strategies that are being implemented— access to healthy food, nutrition education, and SNAP Incentives— are happening all around the country, and they are not only changing eating habits and preventing diet-related disease, but they are also creating jobs and spurring economic development.

¹ Foster, GD, Sherman, S, Borradaile, KE, Grundy, KM, Veur, SS, Nachmani, J, Karpyn, A, Kumanyika, S, Shults, J. (2008). A Policy-Based School Intervention to Prevent Overweight and Obesity. *Pediatrics*, 121(4). doi:10.1542/peds.2007-1365

² Robbins, JM, Mallya G, Wagner A, Buehler JW. Prevalence, Disparities, and Trends in Obesity and Severe Obesity Among Students in the School District of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2006-2013. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2015;12;150185. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd12.150185>.



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I want to share a brief story about Nicole Speller, a participant in one of our free six-week SNAP-Ed cooking workshops that take place in over 500 community sites across Southeastern Pennsylvania. Nicole had decided to make a change and improve her health. She also happened to be a fantastic cook, and each week she would share the recipes she was learning with her neighbors and church group. Upon completing the workshop series, Nicole started her own healthy cooking class at her church. This is just one example of how SNAP-Ed is helping to create a culture of health, and it is happening in innovative ways in every state in the nation.

Of course, understanding how to eat healthier is only part of the problem. Accessing healthy food continues to be a challenge for millions of Americans. Over the last decade, we have seen incredible success through public-private partnerships to incentivize grocery stores to meet the need for better access. The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative funded 88 grocery store projects in urban and rural areas and created 5,000 jobs. Based on this successful model, we now have the federal HFFI and programs in many other states. Most recently, through Governor Kasich's Ohio Fresh Food Program, Vinton County— a rural county in southeast Ohio— is now slated for a new grocery store to open after the only store in the county had previously closed. This store will now serve seniors and working families who have been unable to satisfy the very basic human need of going to the store to buy food.

The same grocers who participate in HFFI programs also stress the importance of nutrition education. It makes sense: if grocers open a store and stock it with fresh produce, they need nutrition education to drive demand for healthy food. This is why both access and education go hand-in-hand, not only to drive better health outcomes, but also to ensure that stores are profitable and serve as economic anchors.

Lastly, I want to discuss incentives that help make healthier choices more affordable. In Philadelphia, 73% of Philly Food Bucks users report eating more fruits and vegetables; and SNAP sales at farmers markets have increased 300% since it began. In Michigan, the Double Up Food Bucks program is available throughout the state at farmers markets and grocery stores, and many hospitals are now participating in Veggie Rx programs allowing physicians to “prescribe” fruits and vegetables to low-income patients. The USDA FINI program has supported the expansion of these SNAP incentive programs. Making healthier food more affordable makes it easier for low-income families to make healthier choices. Many parents might try putting a plate of fresh carrots in front of a toddler. If he doesn't like it, they can just fix him something else to eat. But imagine if you



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only have enough money to afford one plate of food— the decision to try new things becomes much more difficult.

In closing, there is no silver bullet to prevent diet-related diseases like obesity and diabetes, but the costs are real. A recent study calculated the direct medical costs for diet-related disease in 2014 at \$427 billion.³ A comprehensive approach that combines access, nutrition education, and incentives and includes public private partnerships holds the most promise for stemming these rising healthcare costs. SNAP is the foundation of this comprehensive approach. It keeps millions of families from going hungry and is a critical economic pillar for lower income urban and rural communities. Without SNAP, stores would close, jobs would be lost, more families would drop into poverty, and more people would need food stamps. A vicious cycle, if there ever was one. By expanding access to healthy food, nutrition education, and SNAP incentives in the next Farm Bill we can improve health, increase revenues for American farmers, create jobs in urban and rural areas, and control rising healthcare costs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

³ Waters, H., & DeVol, R. (2016). Weighing Down America: The Health and Economic Impact of Obesity. Retrieved from Milken Institute: <http://assets1c.milkeninstitute.org/assets/Publication/ResearchReport/PDF/Weighing-Down-America-WEB.pdf>

