

**Testimony of**  
**Katie Vinopal**  
**Nutrition Associate, D.C. Hunger Solutions**

**Agency Performance Oversight Hearing on Fiscal Year 2009-2010 Budget**

**Department of Human Services**

**Committee on Human Services**

**Council of the District of Columbia**

**February 2010**

**Council Chambers**  
**John A. Wilson Building**  
**1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Room 412**  
**Washington, DC 20004**

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Chairman Wells and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today about the District's Food Stamp Program, which is widely considered our nation's leading defense against hunger. My name is Katie Vinopal and I am a nutrition associate at D.C. Hunger Solutions, an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center. D.C. Hunger Solutions works to create a hunger-free community and improve the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income District residents.

From October 2008 to October 2009, participation in the District's food stamp program grew by over 15%, or just under 15,000 households. D.C. Hunger Solutions is grateful for the opportunity to be part of the Income Maintenance Administration's state outreach plan. This partnership with IMA has enabled us to serve more hard-to-reach populations, such as low-income working families. For the third year, D.C. Hunger Solutions and more than 30 volunteers have teamed up with the D.C. Earned Income Tax Credit Campaign to help connect eligible

individuals to food stamps while they wait for tax preparation services. I would especially like to thank Ellen Wells and Rita Wood-Hinton at IMA for working with us on outreach. This year, as a result of the recession and soaring unemployment, we've seen an increase in the number of people who need food stamps, which, when combined with EITC benefits, can help a family of three with one minimum wage earner (annual income about \$17,160) receive over \$9,000 annually.

Because of the recession and the increase in need, the District must work to ensure that every interested, eligible household can get the food stamp benefits they need to put food on the table. However, this increase in caseload also causes strains on the system resulting in long lines at IMA centers and overworked case workers, as recently highlighted in a January 19 Washington Post article<sup>1</sup>. Fortunately, there are permissible policy options the District can adopt that will simultaneously make more low-income households eligible for higher benefits, reduce the workload of IMA employees, and bring in potentially millions of dollars in federal funding.

I have attached two policy briefs detailing the three proposed policy options. The first, transitional benefits for families leaving TANF, is an automatic five-month continuation of food stamps benefits, adjusted for the loss of TANF income. The second is a standardized self-employment deduction, which eliminates the need for self-employed applicants to verify the numerous costs associated with being self-employed, thus guaranteeing an appropriate benefit level for these participants through a simplified application process. Finally, the District should adopt a standard shelter and utility deduction for homeless households. This option will enable eligibility workers to apply a standard deduction of \$143 for the shelter and utility costs that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/18/AR2010011803863.html>

homeless families inevitably must pay, such as a locker for storage, a motel room for a night, or Laundromat costs, without verifying each expense.

Moving forward, new policies like these can cut down on individual case managers' workloads and simultaneously expand the service and benefits to eligible clients, and bring federal dollars into the District—a rare opportunity in these times. When combined with the implementation of legislation and policy that have already passed—including categorical eligibility, heat and eat, and the adoption of more phone interviews—these policies can make a huge difference for District households most in need. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully submitted,

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Attachments:

- 1) *Easy Choices in Tough Times – Food Stamp Policy Options to Help Working Families, Maximize Federal Funding, and Stimulate the District's Economy*
- 2) *Standard Homeless Shelter/Utility Deduction: Providing Food Stamps to District Families Most in Need*