
Committee Meeting

of

SENATE LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

“The Committee will take testimony from invited guests on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Federal Heat and Eat program, and other governmental programs to combat hunger”

LOCATION: Committee Room 4
State House Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

DATE: January 28, 2016
11:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Robert M. Gordon, Chair
Senator Loretta Weinberg, Vice Chair
Senator Jim Whelan
Senator Thomas H. Kean Jr.
Senator Joseph M. Kyrillos Jr.



ALSO PRESENT:

Michael R. Molimock
Office of Legislative Services
Committee Aide

Mark Magyar
Senate Majority
Committee Aide

John Gorman
Senate Republican
Committee Aide

Meeting Recorded and Transcribed by
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,
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Chairman

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REVISED COMMITTEE NOTICE

TO: MEMBERS OF THE SENATE LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE
FROM: SENATOR ROBERT M. GORDON, CHAIRMAN
SUBJECT: COMMITTEE MEETING - JANUARY 28, 2016

The public may address comments and questions to Michael R. Molimock, Committee Aide, or make bill status and scheduling inquiries to Shirley Link, Secretary, at (609)847-3855, fax (609)292-0561, or e-mail: OLSAideSLO@njleg.org. Written and electronic comments, questions and testimony submitted to the committee by the public, as well as recordings and transcripts, if any, of oral testimony, are government records and will be available to the public upon request.

***The Senate Legislative Oversight Committee will meet on Thursday, January 28, 2016, at 11:00 AM in Committee Room 4, 1st Floor, State House Annex, Trenton, New Jersey.**

The committee will take testimony from invited guests on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the federal "Heat and Eat" program, and other governmental programs to combat hunger.

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SENATOR ROBERT M. GORDON (Chair): This meeting of the Senate Legislative Oversight Committee will come to order.

Would you all rise and join me in the Pledge of Allegiance? (all recite pledge)

Thank you.

May I have a roll call, please?

MR. MOLIMOCK (Committee Aide): Senator Kyrillos.

SENATOR KEAN: Joe's here.

SENATOR GORDON: He's here.

SENATOR KYRILLOS: Yes. Yes, Senator Gordon. (laughter)

MR. MOLIMOCK: Senator Kean.

SENATOR KEAN: Here.

MR. MOLIMOCK: Senator Whelan.

SENATOR WHELAN: Here.

MR. MOLIMOCK: Senator Weinberg.

SENATOR LORETTA WEINBERG (Vice Chair): Here.

MR. MOLIMOCK: Chairman Gordon.

SENATOR GORDON: Here.

Good morning, everyone.

We welcome Senator Whelan, who is sitting in for Senator Ruiz today.

I want to welcome you all to today's meeting of the Senate Legislative Oversight Committee.

Today we will take testimony on recent changes to two programs designed to combat hunger across the state. The first program we will discuss is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program -- better

known as SNAP -- and is the successor to the long-time Food Stamp Program.

On December 31, 2015, Christmas Eve (*sic*), many anti-hunger advocates were shocked to hear the Christie Administration's announcement that the State could no longer continue a statewide waiver exempting approximately 11,000 Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents -- the acronym *ABAWDs* -- from the work requirement provision of SNAP. Under the program, certain residents are required to work at least 20 hours a week to receive subsidized food under the SNAP program. However, in response to a depressed economy, the Federal government allowed the states with high employment rates to waive the work requirement for these able-bodied individuals.

According to our Department of Human Services, New Jersey is currently ineligible to continue the waiver because the state's economy has improved. However, it is still possible to access much-needed Federal dollars. While a statewide waiver may not be feasible due to New Jersey's lower employment rate, the State could have applied for county and municipal-based waivers, targeting communities with higher unemployment rates. Anti-hunger advocates have argued that 15 counties and 5 cities would be eligible for a Federal waiver, reaching approximately 80 percent -- or 9,000 -- of the 11,000 individuals who stand to lose or who already have lost benefits.

Had the State pursued a waiver for the 9,000 individuals in areas of higher unemployment, the loss of over \$17 million in Federal funds could have been averted. Considering the significant loss of Federal funds,

it is important for this Committee to determine why the State failed to apply for county or municipal-based waivers.

The second program we will discuss today is commonly referred to as *Heat and Eat*. This program ties SNAP benefits to the receipt of State heating assistance benefits through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

Prior to a change in Federal policy in 2014, any amount of energy assistance benefits could be considered in determining higher SNAP benefits for households. Under the new policy, however, payments of \$20 per year or less no longer entitle a household to automatically qualify for increases in food benefits. Almost 300,000 households received a \$1 energy benefit under the Heat and Eat program in Fiscal Year 2014; and as a result, 150,000 of those households received enhanced SNAP benefits.

The U.S. Congressional Budget Office estimated that the average affected household would lose \$90 per month. At that rate, New Jersey residents will lose over \$160 million in SNAP benefits per year.

If New Jersey were to provide sufficient funds to meet Federal requirements, at a cost of \$20 per household, the cost to the State would be about \$3 million. That's a \$3 million investment to receive over \$160 million in Federal funds; and at least some of that \$3 million could be charged to the Federal Energy Block Grant program.

Unfortunately, unlike many other states that have adjusted their heating assistance programs, New Jersey still has not taken the appropriate steps to change its program. When New Jersey dollars are already stretched so thin, and painful cuts to worthy programs have become commonplace, we must take appropriate steps to correct any failure on the

part of the State to maximize available Federal dollars. It is even more important that we provide an adequate safety net to individuals in need -- those who have already been hit hard by the great recession, particularly those who suffer from the effects of long-term unemployment. Far too many New Jersey families are suffering due to the state's struggling economy. Charities and food banks are running dangerously low of supplies or have been depleted, when their services are needed most. We cannot simply allow New Jersey to be starved of desperately needed funds due to apparent bureaucratic failures and delays.

We look forward today to hearing from those directly involved in anti-hunger programs -- not only about the impact of these cuts, but also about other initiatives we should undertake to combat hunger in New Jersey.

I want, just for the record, to state that we had invited the Administration to testify. And I received a letter this morning, that I would like to read, from Commissioner Connolly of the Department of Human Services; which I will do right now.

January 27, 2016. "Dear Chairman Gordon and Members of the Committee: I am in receipt of your invitation to testify--"

Let me just stop. Do any members of the Committee wish to make any opening comments?

SENATOR KEAN: After you-- If I may, sir. Why don't you finish this letter--

SENATOR GORDON: Okay.

SENATOR KEAN: --and then when that -- when your comments are done--

SENATOR GORDON: Fine; thank you.

“Dear Chairman Gordon and members of the Committee, I am in receipt of your invitation to testify before the Senate Legislative Oversight Committee this January 28 on issues related to the New Jersey Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, NJ SNAP. Unfortunately, my schedule does not allow my attendance, but I have included in this letter very detailed information about the program and this Department’s actions with regard to recent Federal changes that impact enrollees.

“First, I think it is important to provide some background. SNAP is a Federal program, offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Services, FNS, and administered through the states. In New Jersey, benefits are approved on a county level, through local Boards of Social Services or County Welfare Agencies. The program is designed to supplement or enhance a recipient’s existing food budget.

“Over the past few years, New Jersey has received accolades for our administration of the SNAP program. In September 2012, FNS awarded New Jersey a High Performance Bonus of \$1.8 million for most improved program access to very-low income residents; and in September 2014, the State was awarded \$1.6 million for SNAP Payment Accuracy. We want struggling families and individuals to avail themselves of the assistance they need to get them through tough times. In fact, under this Administration, the Department has taken very meaningful and productive steps to increase enrollment through various outreach strategies.

“For example: Months into this Administration, Governor Christie increased eligibility for NJ SNAP from 130 percent of the Federal

poverty level, to 185 percent -- a move that resulted in nearly 100,000 newly eligible enrollees.

“In March 2011, this Department and the Department of Health forged a partnership to facilitate the enrollment of seniors eligible for the Pharmaceutical Assistance to the Aged and Disabled -- PAAD program -- into New Jersey SNAP, through a data match procedure. Seniors already enrolled in PAAD were identified to see if their income levels qualified them for SNAP; and, if so, they were contacted by county program staff and encouraged to enroll. More than 50,000 seniors have been processed for SNAP benefits.

“The Department also streamlined the intake and redetermination processes by extending certification periods, simplifying the online application, and increasing outreach by engaging nongovernmental and faith-based organizations.

“I share this information with you to underscore the commitment this Administration has to using innovative means and existing operational tools to support and expand our food assistance programs within the parameters set by the Federal government.

“As SNAP is a Federal program and our funding is tied to performance measures, the Federal rules are what guide the State’s actions. Any deficiency or variance in our program can result in interrupted subsidies. This fact was illustrated in July 2014, when the Department was noticed by FNS that the timeliness in reviewing SNAP applications was not meeting Federal requirements. It took a full year of collaboration with the counties, constant monitoring, and improved case load operations to return

the State to good standing. Today, our timeliness rate is at 91.46 percent, up from 72 percent.

“I remind you of this situation so that you understand the need for New Jersey to remain in compliance with the Federal rules and regulations governing SNAP. It is also relevant to the two issues your Committee is discussing on Thursday, and to the actions the Department has taken to impose these mandates.

“Relative to what has been termed the *Heat and Eat* program, I will again provide some background. The initiative was first enacted through the Federal 2008 Farm Bill. It is a term that describes state programs and policies that permitted low-income residents to qualify for a Standard Utility Allowance, SUA, through SNAP -- food stamps -- if they qualified for LIHEAP, the Low-Income Heat and Energy Assistance Program benefits.”

Are we all getting these acronyms? (laughter)

“The practice was meant to provide additional SNAP benefits to individuals with utility costs, who may be placed in the unfortunate situation of deciding between paying for heat or paying for food. Despite the purpose of the policy, many states began providing a nominal amount to families who did not have utility costs in order to raise their SNAP benefit.

“The Federal 2014 Farm Bill sought to end this practice, and defined the minimum Low-Income Heating Energy Assistance Benefit that would give rise to the increased SNAP benefit as greater than \$20. Importantly, separate from the Federal legislation to raise the benefit requirement, a number of interested Congressmen sought guidance from

HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius on whether an individual could receive a LIHEAP payment without regard to that individual's actual eligibility for the program. In May 2014, the Secretary responded that the LIHEAP benefits were to be reserved only for individuals with actual utility costs. Her directive was clear. In light of the Federal mandate, New Jersey is required to provide LIHEAP benefits only to individuals actually eligible for the benefit. In 2014, Governor Christie vetoed legislation that would have undermined the Federal government's requirements.

"It is important to note that individuals remain eligible for the SNAP utility allowance benefit if they receive a \$20 LIHEAP benefit. In New Jersey, the minimum LIHEAP benefit is greater than \$20, so eligible households in New Jersey were not impacted by the Federal increase.

"Similarly, the Federal government set forth the rules for Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents, also known as *ABAWDs*. In 1996, under then-President Bill Clinton, the Federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act established that *ABAWDs* must be involved in a work activity to receive SNAP benefits. The Federal policy requires *ABAWDs* between the ages of 18 and 50 to be working or engaged in work activity for 20 or more hours per week to receive full SNAP benefits. *ABAWDs* who do not fulfill that requirement cannot receive SNAP benefits for more than three months within a period within a three-year period -- 36 months. The three months do not have to be consecutive, and the *ABAWD* must receive a full month of benefits for it to be counted. Importantly, beneficiaries under age 18 or over age 50, pregnant, caring for a household member, in a drug treatment program, mentally or physically

unfit for work, or enrolled in school are not impacted by the work activity requirement.

“In 2009, the Federal government, under the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, waived the ABAWD provision for all states because of the economic recession and the lack of work activities available in states for this population. Since then, economic conditions have improved, including in New Jersey, where the unemployment rate is down to 5.1 percent. As such, that Federal waiver expired in 2015, and New Jersey no longer was eligible for a statewide waiver.

“The Department is working with our colleagues at the Department of Labor and Workforce Development to place ABAWDs into existing work activities run through the county-based OneStop Career Centers -- including job search assistance, job training, literacy programs, and the Community Work Experience Program. Participation in one of the aforementioned programs keeps this population eligible for benefits, and allows them to progress to self-sufficiency.

“In addition, the Department has submitted an application to the Federal government to stand up a “Workfare” program for the ABAWD population, modeled after successful efforts in other states, that, if approved, would allow for structured volunteer opportunities and transportation to volunteer sites. To accommodate the launch of the Workfare proposal, the Department also is in discussion with the Federal government to phase in application of the SNAP work participation standards.

“I hope this information was helpful to you, and that it allows for a balanced and constructive discussion on Thursday.”

I hope we all have that fully understood.

SENATOR WEINBERG: May I just ask a question?

SENATOR GORDON: Senator Weinberg.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Yes, this is obviously a lengthy letter, filled with lots of initials. But what you talked about in your opening remarks I'm not sure were actually addressed in here -- and that is, the ability to exempt people who live in certain communities--

SENATOR GORDON: Right.

SENATOR WEINBERG: --with a higher unemployment rate. Did I miss something in the letter, of her having addressed that aspect?

SENATOR GORDON: No, there was no discussion of these centers of high unemployment.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Okay. I just wanted to make sure I didn't miss it in all the verbiage that's in here -- that one of our main points is not being addressed.

SENATOR GORDON: Right.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Or is not being-- I shouldn't say *isn't being addressed*; was not answered in this letter.

SENATOR GORDON: That's right.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Okay; thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: Senator Kean or Senator Kyrillos? (no response)

Before we start hearing from witnesses, I would also like to read a statement from Senator Vitale, who was invited to appear here today but was unable to do so because of, I think, storm-related issues at his business.

I understand that Senator Vitale is introducing some legislation in this area, and he asked that I read this statement; which I will do.

“Senator Vitale statement on SNAP Legislation, January 28, 2016.

”Chairman Gordon, members of the Committee, staff, and guests. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to weigh in on a critical issue facing our state that unfortunately has a ticking clock.

“Although thousands of New Jerseyans throughout 15 counties were promised a continuation of their SNAP benefits before the end of 2015, the Administration has chosen instead not to support vulnerable members of our society who are down on their luck. There are 60,000 Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents who receive the SNAP benefit in the State of New Jersey. Of those 60,000 people, 11,000 are not currently meeting the employment requirement of working 20 hours per week to continue receiving their benefit. If an able-bodied adult is not meeting the work requirement, they can then only receive three months’ worth of benefit over a three-year time period.

“Unfortunately, in many areas of the state the unemployment rate remains high, and job opportunities remain low. New Jersey has the highest long-term unemployment rate in the country, hovering around 27 weeks. In essence, we are blaming those receiving the benefit for not taking advantage of opportunities that either don’t exist or, at the very least, are hard to find.

“I have drafted legislation to immediately address this issue and to help those members of our society who would be adversely affected by the Governor’s decision.

“First, the legislation would require the Department of Human Services to immediately submit a time-limit waiver request for the 15 counties it originally listed, representing those areas facing the roughest levels of unemployment and limited job opportunities. These 15 counties include Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Essex, Gloucester, Hudson, Mercer, Ocean, Passaic, Salem, Somerset, Sussex, and Union counties. Passaic, Somerset, and Sussex are already on the clock for their benefit, which will expire on April 1. The rest of the counties will begin their three-month time limit on February 1, seeing their benefits expire on May 1.

“Second, it would put into law a trigger that would require DHS to annually apply for the Federal time waiver for areas that show insufficient jobs, pursuant to Federal regulations.

“Lastly, this bill would require DHS to submit monthly reports that detail all of those participants who will lose their SNAP benefits at the end of each month, those who were terminated the previous month, and identity where those participants live. This information will keep the Legislature up-to-date on what is occurring so that we can begin to address these issues in real time, rather than having to play catch-up.

“By taking these measures, we can ensure that our government is taking all the necessary steps to provide food assistance to those in need, understanding that even if a person is an “able-bodied adult,” they still might need a hand when it comes to finding their next meal.

“By not acting, we would not only place undue hardship on those people already suffering, but also place undue hardship on charities and food banks throughout the state. These 1,100 organizations will be

inundated with requests, and will see their resources strained, if not diminished, by the increase of adults in need. We would also miss out on the chance to place millions of dollars of Federal money into the New Jersey economy -- some of the money our taxpayers send to D.C., but that is not returned to us. The SNAP benefit averages from \$160 to \$180 per month. If we do the math just for the 11,000 adults who are not meeting the work requirement, that's nearly \$2 million taken from our local economies.

“This issue brings into light several questions that we need to ask ourselves as legislators and members of a shared state community. Are we providing adequate and appropriate job training programs to address the high levels of unemployment that remain throughout our state? Can we do more to give those not meeting the work requirement an opportunity to do so? This is an issue I hope to work with my colleagues to address, as we move forward.

“But now we must ask ourselves: How do we want to treat those who are struggling to find work and eat? Do we want to be a state that turns our backs on them, that asks them to figure it out for themselves? Or do we want to be a state that does what we can to lend them a helping hand, getting them to a place where they are self-sufficient? If you were facing severe hunger and hardship, wouldn't you want someone to give you a hand up?

“I hope my colleagues will support this piece of legislation which puts in an immediate fix to this problem, and can help to codify that we want to help those who have fallen on rough times going forward. I welcome any suggestions to strengthen this piece of legislation.

“Thank you for your time; and again, I look forward to working with the Legislature and the Administration to get these folks -- our friends, neighbors, and family -- the extra help they need.

“Sincerely, Senator Joseph F. Vitale.”

Any comments by members of the Committee? (no response)

Seeing none, I'd like to start taking some testimony on this issue.

I'd like to begin with an initial panel, which will consist of Adele LaTourette, Director of New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition; Ray Castro, Senior Policy Analyst at New Jersey Policy Perspective; and Diane Riley, Director of Advocacy, the Community FoodBank of New Jersey.

RAYMOND J. CASTRO: Any particular order?

SENATOR GORDON: Whoever would like to start.

MR. CASTRO: Okay.

SENATOR GORDON: Mr. Castro.

MR. CASTRO: Yes; can you hear me? I'm pressing it, but-- (referring to PA microphone)

SENATOR GORDON: We'll get you some assistance.

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Let's see if I have the magic touch.

MR. CASTRO: Thank you very much.

And the Chairman actually outlined a lot of the issues that I was going to raise in my testimony, so I'll deal with some of the issues that have been raised by the Administration on this issue.

With respect to the Heat and Eat program, they're basically saying that they have to comply with Federal rules. It's very clear in the law that they referenced -- the Farm Bill -- that Heat and Eat was not

eliminated. States can continue that and, in fact, about 11 of the 15 states that implemented this program continue to operate Heat and Eat. So it can obviously be done. You have to find out a way to document energy costs, and there are a couple of ways to do that. You can allocate funds, specifically, for this purpose; and we believe that there were additional Federal funds in the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program that could be done (*sic*) for that. I had estimated, a while back, that that would take around \$3 million. But again, those were Federal funds.

And there are administrative ways -- which I believe some of the folks here, at this table, have discussed with the Department of Community Affairs -- that would address this issue as well. So this is an issue that can be addressed in our state.

With respect to the ABAWD issue, it's also very clear that-- I mean, the State is correct that they could not have applied for another statewide waiver. However, it is also clear that the State can apply for waivers for low-income areas of the state, of which there are about 15 counties and 5 municipalities. Our estimates show that that would cover 80 percent of all of the ABAWDs who are affected -- the 11,000 that the Administration estimates.

And I appreciate what the Administration is saying, in terms of their trying to arrange work activities for these individuals. Obviously, they are sort of expressing a challenge here, because they are requesting assistance from the Federal government in terms of establishing a workfare-type program. And that's one of our concerns, is that the State simply doesn't have the capability of providing all of the work activities that are available for these individuals.

I might add that this is not really a work requirement; it's more of a time limit. There is already a work requirement in SNAP that applies to everyone. If the State wanted to, they could have put all of these individuals in work activities under the old rules without this three-year draconian requirement. Because if you want to promote work, you can do that; you just have to provide the resources to do that. You just have to assign these individuals to a work activity. If they don't comply, they become ineligible. But they don't become eligible for three years, which is draconian.

So there are a lot of ways to deal with this. We're perplexed why the Administration is doing this because, administratively, it's going to be a challenge, obviously, for them to provide the work activities that are needed. We suspect a lot of folks are just going to drop out of the SNAP program simply because of the bureaucracy that will be involved. We're concerned about their ability to monitor all these individuals; it's very complicated. You have to monitor everyone now, over a three-year period, in terms of all of their work activities -- whether they met the three-month requirement, and so on. So administratively, this is very, very costly.

So we believe the best approach is the 15 counties. Even if the State did not want to apply for the 15 counties, they could have applied for a waiver for Atlantic County. We know there's a huge unemployment problem; those people don't have jobs. And you can waive this requirement for these individuals if they find full-time employment.

But individuals who are working part-time -- in other words, under 20 hours a week -- are still going to be affected by this time limit because it's not enough work activity. That's what's so unfair about it. So

if you're working part-time, or if you're looking -- doing everything that you can to look for work, you still lose the assistance for three years. And if the State can't find a work activity for you, you're still out of luck, you know? Which makes this requirement very different than all the other programs that we have because, you know, in TANF, for example, if there is no work activity for you, to place you, you're allowed to continue -- right? -- which is only fair. But under this system, if the State is not able to provide the work activities that they need, they become ineligible for three years. So that's just very, very unfair.

So we would strongly support Senator Vitale's legislation. We believe the State should apply for a waiver. It's our understanding that two-thirds of all the states that are in this situation have applied for this waiver. So we don't see any reason why the State should not do so.

We also strongly support-- In fact, we have submitted some draft legislation to the Senate relaying how to monitor this. Because we don't want the situation that we have in-- In Heat and Eat, you know, this took place a year ago and we still don't know, of the 150,000 individuals -- or 160,000, how many of them are affected. We have no data on this. There is no transparency on this issue. So even if the State feels that they have to do this, why aren't they informing us about what the impact has been? And all of this information is going to be helpful to the folks sitting to my right and my left who have to deal with these individuals who go hungry. And that's why we need this information. Because if they do the ABAWD requirement, they should at least know, on a monthly basis, how many people are losing SNAP so they can help them.

Thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: Thank you very much, Mr. Castro.

Senator Kean, did you have a question?

SENATOR KEAN: If I may, through the Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Castro, for your testimony.

According to the Commissioner's letter and Federal law, if an individual applying for this program actually has energy needs -- whether it's part of the rental agreement; or it's part of a written letter between -- where that person is staying, and saying part of this is going to the heating; whether it's a utility bill -- that individual meets all the requirements. That was not removed; this is not a reduction of that benefit. Those individuals who actually have energy expenses are still being met under the original Heat and Eat program, correct? I mean, that's what the Federal law is saying, and that's what the Commissioner is trying to comply with, isn't it?

MR. CASTRO: You are correct. If you can document-- That's the issue. If you can document energy costs--

SENATOR KEAN: Yes.

MR. CASTRO: The reason why we have the Heat and Eat program in the first place was because people-- The elderly and disabled have a lot of difficulty documenting their energy costs. They have difficulty finding documents, they have difficulty going to the county welfare agencies. So they have difficulty showing this. Sometimes they're renters in public housing, for example; they have -- and it's more difficult for them to show that there are energy costs involved in that.

So it was more of an administrative issue. So that's why they did Heat and Eat -- to make it easier for folks who are vulnerable to apply for assistance. You're absolutely-- Of the 150,000, there are probably some

people who did not get their benefits reduced. The Administration has never said how many of those people were (indiscernible) in that category.

SENATOR KEAN: Because it just seems to me-- I mean, we've been working on LIHEAP issues for 20 years or more -- on many of these funds. And it seems to me that, when you're looking at the Heat and Eat program-- Because we want to do everything we can, obviously, to ensure that individuals who are deserving of these programs get absolutely every benefit for which they are entitled. But if they do not have an energy cost, in any way, that they're actually paying for-- I mean, I think what the concern that the Federal government had, and the Obama Administration had was that for a period of time, when we had that economic downturn that impacted everybody in the country, that they were not enforcing this, and the accountability was not there. And you wanted to push the envelope on this and the (Indiscernible) program, to be fair. Since that time, there's been a lot of effort to try to bring integrity back to those programs; the purpose of understanding that if you're actually utilizing energy, then you should be fine as part of that program. If you're using that, there's the Able-Bodied program, there's the SNAP program, there's a variety of other things that allow you to participate in those efforts.

So I'm just making sure that we're clear that those other states, by definition, are breaking Federal law. That was clear by Sebelius, right?

DIANE RILEY: No, that's not-- No, that's maybe not true.

MR. CASTRO: No, I mean-- Well, like I said, the Federal law never repealed Heat and Eat. What they said is that you had to show energy costs in some way. So the question becomes, well, so how do you

document energy cost, and how can you do it in a way that is not a burden on seniors and people with disabilities?

So one option that was discussed -- and I'm not sure if this is allowed now -- but I know one of the discussions that were discussed is a self-affidavit for the individual to say that, "I do have energy costs." I mean, that is sort of an example of a way that would make it easier on the individual -- that they swear that they have an energy costs without them having to go through boxes of receipts to see if they can find their energy costs.

So it really came down to an administrative issue. So you can continue the Heat and Eat program, because it gives you the flexibility to document those energy costs that you're saying are required.

SENATOR KEAN: But it seems to me to document energy costs you would have one bill from a utility, potentially; you would have -- if you're renting, the agreement with a lease for an apartment, for example, or a home -- I mean, the lease would say embedded within this cost are this, and it can be on an annual -- you could say this energy cost is part of this rent, and that's the document. You could have a document associated with -- from the person who is renting the house that part of this issue is this, whether it's not embedded, but you are sharing a room; you could say, "This is the document." There are a number of different ways that could be documented, over the course of a year, to show that person's (indiscernible).

Because if the person is actually putting energy payments in, then they should be eligible. But we want to make sure that those individuals -- as has happened in the past, individuals are participating in

the Heat and Eat program who don't actually have energy costs. I think the question is, you don't want to be in a spot where individuals are potentially abusing the system and getting program dollars that could be used for others who are in need for that very specific issue.

I mean, so I think that's one issue that I've got -- to focus on the energy. We have to make sure that if you have energy costs, there's got to be ways to document that -- from simple to the more complex -- where I'm sure that we can work on, on an administrative basis, to ensure that's happening. Complying with the Federal law, number one.

On the able-bodied component, getting to the issue of the 20 hours per week -- there are a number of programs that say-- Specifically, if you look at Massachusetts, where they've had a workfare program that has included volunteer hours, for example, as part of their program. And I am sure that this Commissioner and others are working to say, if the Massachusetts model, which has been approved by the Administration, is passed, actually works; and so you can account for--

Because the goal for any of the programs is to not only get a -- and thank you for your time, Senator -- is not only to make sure that those individuals in need get the aid they need; but also while they're getting that aid, that they're developing the skills necessary to be -- whether it's on education, whether it's on a job, whether it's on a variety of things-- If they are able-bodied, between 18 and 50, you want to make sure that while they're in the circumstances, that they are also gaining meaningful experience that would then be of value, over time.

And so the question is, if we are able to amend -- to work on it that way, to model ourselves after Massachusetts, you would be able to

work on something that would have both a skill set that focuses on a specific job; but also value volunteer activities and other educational things that count towards those hours. And then you get to the point where you have a meaningful outcome, for not only a program that is meeting Federal standards, but you also have an individual who is getting all those skill sets that are so necessary, going forward.

MR. CASTRO: Right. Well, I mean, I'm all for developing skills and education for this population. But you can do that under the current rules. So the issue is-- I mean, there is already work requirements; you can include them in all the activities that you have mentioned. Under the old rules, they can participate in that. The issue that I have is that the penalty is so draconian. You know, just because somebody misses a few weeks and then -- over a three-month period -- for them to lose SNAP for three years is just cruel, I think; and it's unnecessary.

SENATOR KEAN: But that's a Federal penalty, isn't it?

MR. CASTRO: Pardon me?

SENATOR KEAN: It's a Federal penalty.

MR. CASTRO: That's a Federal-- But you can get a waiver to that; that's the whole point of the waiver.

SENATOR KEAN: Oh; but part of--

MR. CASTRO: So I mean, under the old rule, you can suspend them for -- you can also suspend them from SNAP, but it's only for a month until -- unless they decide to go back into the work activity again.

SENATOR KEAN: Right. But you're--

MR. CASTRO: So we have a very good system, currently. What this does is, it adds this huge draconian requirement that you're going

to lose SNAP for three years if, within the first three months, you don't meet all those other requirements. And so why go that far? You can promote work without doing that.

SENATOR KEAN: You're arguing-- Which is why I'm saying, if you had a compound-- You do have to apply for a waiver if you're going to -- like, volunteer activity, which Massachusetts already does. Each state has to focus on the standards set for that state. Very rarely are there blanket waivers for the Federal; each state has to say, "This is how we're going to meet that number," correct?

MS. RILEY: Yes, I think we're taking that too; we have that too.

SENATOR KEAN: Right. So the goal is to try to figure out the mechanism by which you can meet those numbers. But if you're saying that something is cruel and unusual punishment, you're talking about a Federal law, not a State law. But we can seek a waiver.

MS. RILEY: Well, I think--

MR. CASTRO: But what we're waiving -- but that's what we're--

SENATOR GORDON: Senator, what I would like to do--

MR. CASTRO: We're allowed to waive the Federal law.

A D E L E L a T O U R E T T E: Yes, exactly.

SENATOR GORDON: With your indulgence, I'd like to give the other two witnesses a chance to--

MR. CASTRO: All right.

MS. RILEY: I can start with my testimony.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Let me just ask--

MS. RILEY: I can start with my testimony. Let's--

SENATOR GORDON: Oh, hold on.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Hold on.

MS. RILEY: Let's--

MR. CASTRO: Okay.

SENATOR GORDON: Senator-- If I could just let Senator Weinberg--

SENATOR WEINBERG: Yes; just a question to Mr. Castro.

I'd like to get back to the waiver. For areas with high unemployment, are we too late to apply for that?

MR. CASTRO: No; no, we're not.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Okay.

MR. CASTRO: And that's because no one has been taken off of SNAP yet, because we have the three-month window. So until then, the State can still apply for a waiver.

SENATOR GORDON: All right. Let's--

SENATOR WEINBERG: Okay, then that would be a very good outcome from this Committee--

SENATOR GORDON: Right.

SENATOR WEINBERG: --if I may jump to the end.

MS. RILEY: May I just quickly add to that answer?

I'm sorry; excuse me.

SENATOR GORDON: Why don't you proceed?

MS. RILEY: I also have clarification from FNS that we can apply for a waiver at any time.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Can the other two turn off their microphones, and then yours will come out more clearly.

Okay.

MS. RILEY: I just -- I want to say one thing before I go into my testimony -- and that is, everybody on the SNAP program has a work requirement -- ABAWDs, everybody today, okay? They do. The difference is the time limit for that certain group of people. So they have a work requirement; you can do community service -- all of that, that's happening, that's it. Massachusetts -- because I've been in touch with many food banks -- does have waivers, okay? They are taking waivers. And they have wonderful documentation on what people can do, and they're doing a lot of outreach -- beautiful documentation on exactly who to call if they have a question, where to go, what to do, everything. So yes, they are a model, they are a model to do that.

So to start, my name is Diane Riley. I am the Director of Advocacy for the Community FoodBank of New Jersey. We are the largest food bank in New Jersey, and we cover, directly, 12 counties; most in the north, but also Atlantic, Cape May, and Cumberland. And through our other partners, we help distribute, throughout the state, 44 million pounds of food to 900,000 unique individuals. And about 8 million times a year someone goes to a partner agency to get food from one of the feeding programs that are -- the food banks provide food to. So we have long been in the business of helping people put food on the table.

For the record, charity cannot do it alone; we were never meant to do it alone. We have long been in partnership with government; the State of New Jersey provides us with \$6.8 million, I believe, of money to

buy food every year; thank you very much. That goes a long way to serving those 900,000 people.

We also get food from the Federal government. We are one of the people who are on the State outreach plan. So a few years ago-- You know, the Federal government provides funds for people to do -- for states to do outreach. And when they are doing as much as they can, they can provide those outreach dollars from the Federal government to partners. And we are one of those, as are several other food banks.

So we work every day to connect people with those benefits; and we get partial funding for that, and we're very, very grateful. Because the SNAP program is the cornerstone of nutrition assistance in this country, nothing we do, as a food bank, could compare with that large, very efficient program. Over 50 percent of the people coming to food pantries, in fact, get SNAP benefits. So we are part of the safety net. When those benefits run out -- because they are not meant to cover all their expenses for food -- they come to us.

So every time we have a cut in SNAP, we are really, dramatically, affected by that, as a food bank; because people have nowhere else to go.

Our program, the program that I run, helped about 2,000 people apply for SNAP last year. We go to community organizations throughout the counties, and go to where people are -- senior buildings, libraries, WIC offices, feeding programs -- and we sit there and we actually talk to people, and help them apply using the online application.

I would say that-- And I want to say that we've been doing this for four or five years. And up until about a year ago, we did not have a

great record in processing. So we can only do the first step -- we can help them apply. But then there's a very lengthy process that people go through; it has a lot of integrity; it's governed by the Federal government. You have to have an interview, you have to send documents, there's a lot of good integrity in the program.

A lot of times, though, people will-- Since it's administered by the counties, they were not able to keep up. In the last seven years, we've doubled the amount of people receiving SNAP in the State of New Jersey. It hovers around 900,000 also. The counties could not keep up with that for a long time.

And so people would fall through the cracks. Even though we would help them, they would not actually -- it didn't guarantee that they would get the benefits. But I want to say, for the record, that that has greatly improved. The Commissioner is absolutely right; what we're seeing now, instead of 60, 90 days -- and sometimes never -- delay, we are calling people who we help, and within 30 days they are hearing from social services. And that has been a great, great improvement. So I want to say that, for the record. It's amazing; they should be commended, along with the counties.

We can always do more, however. We do have antiquated computer systems; I would love, in our outreach, to be able to take a picture of people's documents that I'm looking at and upload that to an application. How wonderful is that? I can do that with my income taxes; all kinds of things. But we can't. That would go a long way. So this putting money into that kind of technology would go a long way to shortening those steps for people, especially seniors. That is a population

that is very, very difficult to go through all these steps, okay? So we need to do something about that.

I want to talk a little bit about the cuts and what we know about the cuts. Several years ago-- Well, there's actually been three cuts to SNAP in the last several years. The first one came from the Federal government; it was a roll-back on the increased benefits that the ARRA legislation allowed, helping people through the financial crisis. That was rolled back early, and everybody in the nation saw a cut of about \$16. And even at that time we were able to document, as food banks and the Anti-Hunger Coalition, we were able to try to document what just that meant for people, an average person. And we saw a great-- Sixty percent of the feeding programs that answered that survey said they were seeing dramatic increases. And many of those were saying they were reducing the amount of food they were giving out, or they were having to close early, or do other things. So we know it affects -- you know, that's just an example of how it affects.

So let's talk a little bit about the Heat and Eat and the ABAWD. So the Heat and Eat-- Ray is actually right. The Heat and Eat program was a link that allowed an administrative connection; and it allowed that streamlining to get people benefits quicker; it allowed them to have a higher benefit because of that unique link. Actually, it used to be \$1; you had to give them \$1 in energy assistance. So the idea wasn't -- it wasn't that you were giving them a lot of energy assistance, and it doesn't have to be LIHEAP; it doesn't. It can be any energy assistance. And that's how it was done. And we were able to just connect people and get that. And they got a higher benefit.

And then the Federal government came and they said -- they didn't eliminate it; he's right. They said you had to get at least \$21, or over \$20. And there was a letter that had some guidance.

But I believe these 12 -- 11, 12 other states are still doing it because they were able to allow a broader documentation of-- They aren't not complying with the Federal government; they just allowed a broader documentation of utilities. Believe me, if I'm a renter -- I don't care where I am -- if I'm getting heat, somehow that rent is contributing to the heat. So there's some kind of energy assistance; whether you want to go that vague or not, you can make that case.

The people we saw, and who still disturb me greatly, are the seniors and the people with disabilities in public housing. Those people were never able to get the proper documentation at all. So while other people-- And they were cut with SNAP; and then they had to take months to get the proper documentation to then take to social service, to then get that connection back, and then get their benefits, sort of, restored somewhat to the level they were used to.

So there was an interruption; and I don't know exactly how many people are still not getting it. But I do know the stories, because I hear the stories. And the people in public housing are still devastated, and they have had their benefits cut about \$90 a month. Many people who cannot eat food that food banks give, or they have some health issues, are really hurting because they are not being allowed -- they don't have the money to now buy the things they could eat and should be eating for their health. That's how we're seeing it; that's actually what we're seeing. And they are devastating stories.

One of the Federal programs we participate in and facilitate is called *CSFP* -- Commodity Supplemental Food Program. It is not an entitlement; it's a wonderful Federal program. With that program, we are allowed to go to senior buildings and give out a box of food. The problem is, that only affects 3,000 seniors in New Jersey because it's capped. And there are so many people in those communities who come to us and talk about the SNAP that got cut, because they were using all of this as a safety net. And we aren't going to a lot of buildings -- you know, we're missing a lot of buildings, because there is that cap. So we can't make up for that kind of cut.

So if we were to have legislation like SNAS, which we might be able to propose -- which was a program before Heat and Eat, and it helped seniors on SSI get a supplemental additional amount of money for their SNAP -- with their SNAP. And that took care of kind of that -- some of that population. That was eliminated because we had Heat and Eat. So now, if you're not going to have that, we may have to go to another program -- which will be harder to administer, but could affect those people and get them the benefits. But again, it's now been a year, and they don't have those benefits.

So going to ABAWD now. ABAWDs are a unique group of people who have a time limit. They have a work requirement, but they have, also, a time limit. So the time limit is that they are thrown off the program if they don't comply within -- you know, for three months -- you've heard this -- over a three-year period; they can't get back on the program. That's the difference; that's the only difference. They still have a work requirement. We still want them to work. Many people do work;

almost 50 percent of the people on SNAP, who we know about, do work. So they may not work 20 hours; they may have a variable in their work. We know, in Cape May, it's a seasonal community that we serve. That's a seasonal community; they don't always get the hours. But yet, they are going to be thrown off the program, and that's a unique thing. This is the first cut where people are actually going to be thrown off the program, and they won't be able to get back on. I don't see how that helps when all you can buy is food with food stamps. You know, I don't see how that helps them remain strong and looking for work.

The other difference is, they have additional restrictions on the kinds of activities. One is, looking for work doesn't count with an ABAWD, with this time limit; but it does count on a regular work requirement. So I'm not sure why we need to have this additional thing if, especially, we can take waivers for counties and towns that we know have a high unemployment.

And I'll just take questions. I think that's a lot of information.

SENATOR GORDON: Okay. Let's turn to Ms. LaTourette.

MS. LaTOURETTE: Good afternoon. Is this working?
(referring to PA microphone)

SENATOR WEINBERG: Now, hopefully you can hear me.

I just want to give, as an introduction to Adele-- The last time I saw her -- and I want to point this out -- was as a member of a panel in Bergen County -- in Teaneck, I think, we actually were -- the National Council of Jewish Women, on a panel entitled, "The Two Bergen Counties." Bergen County is always looked upon as this very affluent place. And I'm giving you a little introduction here, Adele. The fact that we have

these pretty large pockets of hungry people right in a very affluent place like Bergen County really demands attention throughout the state. And I just wanted to point that out. There were probably 250 people in the audience. And so I'm giving you an introduction -- even though the audience out there is not quite as large here, hopefully there's an audience that's watching all of this.

So thank you.

MS. LaTOURETTE: Thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: Ms. LaTourette, please proceed.

MS. LaTOURETTE: Okay; I think I'm on; yes, you can hear me.

All right. So you guys have a lot of information, and a lot of acronyms. I'm going to try not to give you any more.

There are a couple of points of clarification I think it's important to bring up. One is that, in terms of the ABAWD issue, New Jersey has been applying for waivers since 1997. So this was long before the 2008 statewide waiver. And I think it's-- I don't think we can say enough that it's a time limit; it is not a work requirement. New Jersey has a work requirement; I know everyone has been saying it. I'm just going to back it up and say the same thing.

The other thing-- I mean, again, the devil is in the details. You talk about people getting into employment and training programs. You talk about the fact that job search does not count as an employment and training program. Eligible work activities are not always available; we know that. We know the Department of Labor is certainly not used to dealing with this population at all. We know that work programs stop and start at

varying times, so that someone could actually fall out of compliance for a month, and this would count towards one of their months in this 36-month period.

We also know that, unlike the regular employment and training program through SNAP, if someone doesn't comply, and then complies, they will only be reinstated for three months; and that additional clock -- they are stopped for the rest of that 36-month clock. So there's no way to, kind of, redeem yourself.

Volunteer opportunities do count. Here's really, again, the devil is in the details. There are a lot of counties that have never administered the ABAWD provision. They, as well as the rest of us -- and I believe the State Administration itself -- were under the impression that these waivers were a *fait accompli*. They were going to -- they were going to go in, these waiver requests for these particular counties. No one was prepared. These county programs, as has been talked about -- the county welfare agencies have struggled in the past with dealing with the numbers that they're having to be dealing with. They are now suddenly having to get people into programs, having to refer them to DOL; people are having to comply. The structures simply are not in place. And for some counties, that clock is already ticking.

I did have a discussion with the head of our Regional Food and Nutrition Service through the United States Department of Ag. We can apply for a waiver at any time. So that waiver option is always out there; there's no time limit to that.

So that's on ABAWD. There's a lot of information out there. Also, again, in terms of just what the counties can do -- the State can pledge

to provide employment, and training, and workfare programs to every SNAP participant who falls into this ABAWD category. If we're going to have an ABAWD time limit, we need to help these people out, and we need to pledge to do it.

But also in talking to my community contacts throughout the state, none of them had any idea that this was happening. They didn't have any clue that this was happening; again, because nobody thought it would happen. So now everybody is scrambling, which means, inevitably, that people are going to fall through the cracks. And what that means to the emergency food system is that they will be showing up at our doors.

MS. RILEY: They already are.

MS. LaTOURETTE: As Senator Weinberg said, we have seen unprecedented increases -- not just in Bergen, but across the state in every community in the state -- in terms of the number of people who are hungry. We simply cannot keep up with the volume. We now are facing-- And honestly, 11,000 is such an underestimate. We now are facing a massive increase in the number of people who will be coming to our doors who have literally no other option.

But people need to know, and they need to be informed, and they need to be told what it is they have to do, and how it is they have to do it, and how they can comply. There's no form for people who could be medically gotten out of the ABAWD provision. There's no form for it, there's no provision for it. It's not being uniformly administered, because it's barely being administered.

There has to be increased transparency about what the State -- what the plans are and what the State is doing; and there isn't. At this

point, we really -- the advocacy community does not have communication with the Department of Human Services. It's really been a struggle just to get any kind of information.

In terms of Heat and Eat -- again, backing up what Diane said -- it's not illegal; states are doing it. And what they're doing-- Some states are actually providing-- As Ray said, it would cost the State \$32 million to provide that amount of that energy assistance to that population. And for that amount of money, we would bring in -- how much is it?

MR. CASTRO: It's \$170 million.

MS. LaTOURETTE: It's 170 million Federal dollars a year. The decisions that are being made mean that we are losing out on Federal dollars. In places like Atlantic City -- where, honestly, the more revenue you get into that community, the better off you are -- they can't afford to lose that economic improvement; and the State can't, in general.

We have to begin looking at that. We have to begin looking at the fact that we're losing Federal dollars; more and more people are going to food pantries and soup kitchens that simply can't keep up. Charity was not meant to do this; SNAP is the frontline of defense against hunger.

And just on a different note: What I gave you -- part of what I gave you is Departmental recommendations that, across the board, will improve access to food throughout people, and through SNAP, through school breakfast, and school lunch. It's going to take every single program to do this; but also to put back in things like what Diane was talking about -- the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to seniors, which, honestly, was a very tiny program. It was only 400 people, but it provided increased benefits to that population.

I cannot tell you -- and I'm going to stop after this -- the stories that we hear on our end. I know Diane spoke about one yesterday. People who call us up -- seniors, people who are disabled -- who literally pick up the phone and start crying about how they went from \$150 a month to \$16 a month. And there's no way they can feed themselves on that.

And there are things we can do. It is not rocket science; it's bringing Federal money into this state which, Lord knows, we desperately need. And I hope to God that this Committee will start working on that and getting it done.

SENATOR WHELAN: Mr. Chairman.

SENATOR GORDON: Senator Whelan.

SENATOR WHELAN: Yes, thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me, first, thank you for having this hearing on what is, obviously, a very critical issue. And I appreciate the speaker's reference to Atlantic City and Atlantic County, where I'm from; but really, this is a statewide issue. It's Bergen County, as Senator Weinberg has said, and throughout.

Let me thank our panelists here, and others, for the work that you do in fighting hunger in New Jersey. I'm very aware of the Community FoodBank in Atlantic County; I have an ongoing relationship with them. And the story's been told -- and I know it's repeated, probably, in every Community FoodBank, or various other food banks throughout the state -- where people who used to go and bring food to the food bank, and used to go and volunteer -- they may come and still volunteer, but now they're

taking food out of the food bank because their economic circumstances have turned around to that extent.

I really have a question for Diane Riley -- or any of you can answer, but since you-- Let's bring this down where the rubber meets the road; and Ms. LaTourette started to do this. But what happens at the Community FoodBank level, within the Community FoodBank, if we don't get this waiver with 11,000-plus people coming in? And also, what do you anticipate the impact to be on the individuals who will have this dramatic change in their SNAP program?

MS. RILEY: I think they're going to come to food pantries. The only alternative they have, if they can't -- they don't have enough money to buy food -- which they'll have less money to buy food -- is to go to a pantry, and to go through that charitable distribution. And that will put, as I said, with the little cut we had with ARRA -- not even little, but-- It will have a dramatic effect. We will hear from our agencies that they need more food, and they're feeding more people, and they're-- But that is not the mechanism that we were designed to do. Because, as you said, we know 70 percent of the people who come already, are coming on a regular basis to get food because they don't have anywhere-- You know, there's no other alternative.

So I think it will be a dramatic impact. I don't know that we are the mechanism to fill it, even if we had the food, because we're not that kind-- We were never meant to be that.

Also, we give out a certain amount of food-- Sometimes we rely on charity donations, food drives, and everything like that. We try very hard to give out nutritious food; we are giving out more fruits and

vegetables. But that-- We give out what we have. That is not always going to help certain people. They need-- It's much better if they have money to buy what they can buy and what they can eat. It is the most effective thing. And when they work more hours, and when they get -- then they aren't eligible. They earn more money; they're not eligible for food stamps. That's the way the program works. You earn more money; you're not eligible at all, because you have an income guideline. And that's why it grows when things are bad -- and especially in counties like Atlantic, and when you have casino closings -- and it shrinks when people get jobs. And that's why it's a wonderful entitlement program.

So we've got that built in to the program. It's not that people are trying to get over on something.

What I am disturbed about, as Adele said, is we don't have any -- we have a lot of partner agencies that could take volunteers. That might actually help them comply with this. I don't know what I'm supposed to give someone that the counties are going to accept -- that, you know, is going to show that they did that. We're not even being used in the way we can as outreach, to get the right information to people to adhere to something as kind of monumental as this, that's happened in one day, you know. It's going to start next month. I don't have that information.

Massachusetts is a great example. They've been doing a lot of outreach, they've been doing presentations on where it's waived and where it's not. They've been giving -- they have a hotline where people can call with questions. They are doing it right, okay? We don't have any of that. And yet, our counties -- which are finally climbing out of their timeliness issue -- are going to have to keep track of 11,000 people for the months

they work and the months they don't. Does that make any sense? That doesn't even make sense.

SENATOR WHELAN: Thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: Ms. LaTourette, you explained that this was -- some of these policy changes were a great shock.

MS. LaTOURETTE: Yes.

SENATOR GORDON: Do you have -- have you received any information as to what brought these sudden changes about? I mean, I don't want you to speculate, but do you have any information on what caused these policy changes?

MS. LaTOURETTE: It was our understanding-- I'm the head of the New Jersey SNAP Working Group, of whom, pretty much, everyone in this room is a member. And we had a conversation with the Department; and it was our understanding that this was going to go forward. It was our understanding that it was in the Administration's plan, and we just -- out of the blue, it was announced that it, in fact, wasn't going to happen. So we really don't. One can speculate until the cows come home, but we don't know.

SENATOR GORDON: Okay.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Bob?

SENATOR GORDON: Yes.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Oh, I'm sorry.

SENATOR GORDON: Senator Weinberg.

SENATOR WEINBERG: First of all, just a comment because-- It's always amazing to me how heavily scheduled all these Commissioners are whenever we need them to come to a Committee meeting. (laughter)

Just a little footnote. And perhaps had she been here, we could get some of these questions answered.

So I would like to know, through this Committee -- and I guess that question has to be put to the Acting Commissioner of Human Services -- why they didn't apply for the waivers. There must be -- hopefully, there are some good reasons. And if not, and it's that -- we encourage that those applications be made in as timely and as soon as possible.

When I sit next to Senator Whelan, who represents Atlantic County -- and we all know the stories out of Atlantic City and Atlantic County -- and he said, when I asked a little earlier, they're hovering, in the county, I think, at about 9 percent unemployment. I'm speaking on your behalf right now.

SENATOR WHELAN: Thank you. (laughter)

SENATOR WEINBERG: But that is much higher because many of those people are just lost to the system, now, so they're not being counted.

So the fact that we had a way through this waiver -- it is really shocking to me that it was not exercised. So I think that's -- those are questions that we need to get answers to; and, hopefully, the Acting Commissioner might have a schedule that will permit her to answer those questions.

SENATOR GORDON: Yes, I concur that this Committee needs to pose those questions and get the answers.

Was there some issue from Washington? Was it some directive that came from the Governor's Office? We can speculate until the cows come home, and I think we really need to get the facts.

MS. LaTOURETTE: May I add something?

SENATOR GORDON: And I'd also just like to ask staff to be prepared to address a letter to the Acting Commissioner with our questions; give her the opportunity to come before the Committee again at a more opportune time for her, or at least get us the answers in writing. And, certainly, we'd prefer her to be here.

Ms. LaTourette.

MS. LaTOURETTE: I'd like to say, also, in that conversation with FNS -- they have approved every waiver that's come from every other state within the region. I don't believe at all that it was a Federal issue.

SENATOR GORDON: Okay.

So much of public policy in this State seems to be driven by one force; but we won't go there.

We've heard some suggestions from Senator Vitale, for example, on how to address this time-limit issue. Do any of you have any suggestions for legislative changes to deal with the Heat and Eat -- to provide the flexibility for the kind of documentation or the information they're looking for?

MR. CASTRO: Well, you know, at a minimum, we would like to find out what the impact is. So I could see either asking the Department, in terms of what really happened to all those folks -- what happened to all of the 150,000 who were affected? Did they follow up on any of them; did they try to help any of them? Or proposing legislation so that they would have to provide a monthly report which would show where they are in the system. As a minimum, we should know what the impact is.

SENATOR GORDON: Okay; anyone else?

MS. LaTOURETTE: Also, again, I think to kind of offset -- at least offset the impact of Heat and Eat, we could do a standard medical deduction for seniors. Remember, this population is primarily senior and disabled; it's the most vulnerable population. We can implement an Elderly Simplified Application Project from SNAP.

Another proposal -- and I know it's going to sound out there, because it kind of is -- is, basically, the State to provide a supplement to enhance that \$16-a-month minimum benefit, and make it \$30. There are states that have done that; Washington, D.C. does that. But frankly, I think it would cost less to put in \$3.2 million and give people the utility assistance so that they could have access to that increased benefit.

SENATOR GORDON: Okay.

MR. CASTRO: And I would just say, actually, it's probably a lot less than \$3.2 million; because we're assuming that everyone-- Right? So it's going to cost less than that. And they have the money in the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program -- which is Federal anyway -- because you can use those Federal funds to do this as well.

SENATOR GORDON: Okay.

Any other questions? (no response)

Thank you all very much.

I'd like to bring the next panel up; and that will consist of Grace Egan, Executive Director of the New Jersey Foundation for Aging; Dennis Micai, Executive Director of the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen; Barbara Scholz, Director of County Outreach for Monmouth and Ocean FoodBank; and if Carlos -- I don't know whether Carlos Rodriguez is here, at this point.

MR. MAGYAR (Committee Aide): I think Carlos is here; he replaced Barbara.

SENATOR GORDON: Okay.

I'm told that Carlos is replacing Barbara Scholz.

CARLOS M. RODRIGUEZ: Yes.

SENATOR GORDON: Okay; good.

Whoever would like to start.

DENNIS MICAI: Sure, if I may Senator. Thank you.

I'm getting a knee replacement shortly, and I have to get a dental clearance. (laughter) So I have to give my testimony, and move on, if it's okay. I apologize. Thank you.

First, I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

My role is a little bit different than everybody else here. While I run the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, now, a community organization; before that, I was the Director at the Mercer County Board of Social Services, and I was responsible for administering the Food Stamp Program in Mercer County. So my perspective is, maybe, a little different than some of the other advocates who are here today.

And if I may, I want to just speak a little bit about both those things, if I may.

SENATOR GORDON: Sure.

MR. MICAI: First, let me just tell you about the Soup Kitchen right now. I've been there for nine years; and when I started there, nine years ago, we used to do about 150,000 meals a year. Now we're doing 250,000 meals a year. We had one satellite back then; we now have 12 satellite sites, including two in Hightstown, two in Hamilton, and two in

Princeton. So hunger is not an issue confined to the urban areas or the City of Trenton. It is all over the Mercer County area, at this point in time.

We also provide -- work with the Mercer Street Friends Food Bank to provide meals to school children on the weekends -- and that provides about another 50,000 meals a year that we're doing for children -- school children around the entire Mercer County area.

One other way to put this thing into perspective is that I'm now on my second building expansion since I've been there, due to the fact that we've expanded so much. And after hearing what's going on with ABAWDs, maybe I need to revisit my second expansion to make it bigger than my initial vision was -- because I have a feeling we're going to need that extra space.

But going back to my role at the County welfare agency years ago -- it was interesting to hear some of the comments that the Commissioner made in her letter to you. When I first got involved with the Food Stamp Program, New Jersey was always cited for low participation rates. And we had a huge outreach effort to increase participation, which we worked with the community advocates on; which led to that bonus that was received a while back. I'm suspecting that if-- We're going in the other direction now, so maybe not only will we lose the bonus, but we may, again, be cited for having a low participation rate in the program.

Secondly, this ABAWD function will be subject to the quality control rate. And the other bonus that she mentioned was for high performance and low error rates. Well, looking at how this program is going to be administered -- one of the other folks mentioned how the tracking is going to have be done, and keeping track -- I suspect that the

error rate is going to increase, and New Jersey may be having a bill to pay for exceeding the national average in the error rate. So not only are we going to lose the Federal funds and the bonuses, we're going to probably get stuck with a bill on top of it, I would suspect.

I also would bet you that the economic generation kind of -- we've talked about it a little bit, but it wasn't specific. The studies have shown that every Federal \$1 that comes in through the food stamp program generates \$7 of economic activity in that community. So we're talking about millions, and millions, and millions of dollars lost -- not just in the Federal funds, but in economic activity that we all know that our communities need, at this point in time, to have some generation in that.

And I'm not going to repeat some of the things my colleagues said regarding the employment rate and what not; we all know what that is. But I can tell that one of the things we do at TASK is we get virtually no government money; we get-- About 3 percent of our funds come from the government; some of that -- as we are a Community Work Experience site for the General Assistance Program. And I can tell you, those are able-bodied adults. And those folks want to work, they do work, they come every day. In fact, they even come when they don't have to. They've met their monthly requirement, and they still show up. They show up on Christmas, they show up on Thanksgiving, they show up on special events because they enjoy having the activities to do.

And I can tell you that my contacts with some of the CWAs -- as I still have contacts in the County here -- they've received virtually no training yet on how to implement this ABAWD program; they have gotten no direction from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development

on what sites are going to be available. In fact, they're having difficulty placing the current people into sites now because they're just not available. So to think that we're automatically going to be able take these 11,000 people -- whoever they are -- and place them within the next 30 days, is probably not a realistic thing to be thinking about.

Thank you; and I'll complete there.

Thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: Thank you.

Ms. Egan.

G R A C E E G A N: Do you have any questions for Dennis before he leaves? Anybody?

SENATOR GORDON: Well--

SENATOR WHELAN: I do.

SENATOR GORDON: Yes, Senator Whelan.

SENATOR WHELAN: Very quickly -- and again, as was with the previous panel, thank you all for your work here.

And your numbers are staggering: 150,000 to 250,000, and so on. Briefly, could you just tell us your funding sources? I mean, are you getting State or Federal dollars?

MR. MICAI: Less than 3 percent of our money comes from government. We get -- we have the small grant that we receive through the Department of Labor and Workforce Development as a Community Work Experience site. I get a little bit of money from FEMA, and I get a little bit of money from the City of Trenton through a Community Development Block Grant. But all the rest of our money is private donations; in fact,

through foundations, churches -- 70 percent is actually from individual donations.

SENATOR WHELAN: Well, again, thank you for the work you do.

MR. MICAI: Thank you.

SENATOR WHELAN: I just wanted to get a sense of what it was, which I think is fairly typical for--

MR. MICAI: Most of the organizations are going to tell you the same thing; yes, sir.

SENATOR WHELAN: Right; okay. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

SENATOR GORDON: Thank you.

Mr. Micai, just a-- Let's take advantage of your perspective as the Administrator of a County program.

Do you have any thoughts or suggestions on how best to deal with the Heat and Eat program -- the documentation problem, or a surrogate for the documentation issue?

MR. MICAI: I do not want to just repeat what my colleagues said, but they pretty much nailed it. I really think that the issue is not a matter of anything other than being able to document that somebody is paying utilities, somehow or another. And there are multiple ways to address that issue that were mentioned earlier.

The biggest problem is those in public housing, I think; it has been a significant issue for those folks. But you only need a small amount of energy assistance or payment in order to qualify for the SNAP benefit also. It's not that complicated; it really isn't.

SENATOR GORDON: So you're saying that the easiest way to deal with this would be for the State to just develop an appropriation for a small sum that would be provided to each household that would --

MR. MICAI: That less than \$3 million that Ray mentioned would probably do it.

SENATOR GORDON: Yes; okay. Okay.

Also, I mean, this Committee is particularly interested in how to improve government processes to achieve our objectives. And from what I hear you say, is that apparently there's just been no planning to deal with this situation; that if this additional population showed up at your door, the procedures wouldn't be in place, the forms aren't there, the training hasn't been done. It sounds as if someone has really dropped the ball.

MR. MICAI: I would have to agree with that, Senator, 100 percent. (laughter)

The only instruction they had was what changes were going to take place in the computer system on trying to track this. But that is totally dependent on the staff at the CWA being able to code the system to show that -- it's going to take-- And then as it was mentioned earlier, every time somebody does an activity, you add it; every time they don't, you have to take it out. And as I've said before, we have to remember: This is not happening in a vacuum. There are other things going on at CWAs, as you're aware. We had a huge problem when the Medicaid expansion system came in.

SENATOR GORDON: Yes.

MR. MICAI: We had a huge problem in processing the Food Stamp applications back a while ago; and now this. And so to think that all

this is going to happen, just because it's only just one more thing -- it's really not just one more thing. There are all these other things happening.

And I should mention, also, that most CWAs are also operating at a lower staffing level than when I was there. I know, at Mercer County alone, they get 20 percent more people coming through the front door every day than when I was there; and their staff is down about 25 percent from when I was there.

SENATOR GORDON: Okay; well, thank you very much for your information.

MR. MICAI: You're welcome. Thank you, Senator.

SENATOR GORDON: And good luck with your procedure.

MR. MICAI: I appreciate the opportunity.

SENATOR GORDON: And we look forward to working with you and the others who have been here today in trying to craft some solutions to this.

MR. MICAI: Thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: Ms. Egan.

MR. MICAI: If I may leave.

MS. EGAN: Yes; thank you, Dennis.

Thank you very much. I appreciate being invited.

And I have given you written testimony, so I'm just going to pull a few excerpts out of it so that we can move along.

The New Jersey Foundation for Aging did the Elder Index, which many of you are familiar with. And given that data, we know that more than 255,000 individuals -- who live either alone or in elder-couple households -- do not have enough dollars to cover their basic expenses. And

these seniors are living just, literally, one catastrophe from living in poverty. They live on the edge of poverty or in poverty.

And we know that 63 percent of these individuals are women; 60 percent of them are over age 75, which I think is a unique population; and 22 percent are minority seniors.

Now, I want to also say this is across the board. We have these seniors, these elders, living in every county -- whether it's Morris County, whether it's Bergen County, Passaic -- it's across the board. And so I think it's a very important issue.

The other thing is that we know that 30 percent of New Jersey seniors rely solely on Social Security, and that's never what it was meant to be. So we know the average Social Security for a woman in New Jersey is \$15,191; and we know it's slightly higher for a man. This is significant because our studies showed that, in order to have the income to live in a one-bedroom apartment and cover your expenses of food, housing, transportation, etc., you need \$29,496. So right away, that woman with the ideal average of \$15,000 is really short.

However, we know that many seniors do not get the state averages. For example, I have a letter on my desk where we know this woman, who lives in Mercer County, gets just under \$800 a month. After she pays her rent, in public housing, she has \$104 left for the month. So she was fortunate in that she's in public housing; she doesn't own a car, she rides a bike and she's 85. And she gets -- she applied for SNAP. Now, prior to the cuts, she was getting \$168 a month in food stamps from SNAP. And so I think this is significant.

Now, putting the ARRA cuts, and Heat and Eat, and other cuts -- obviously, she's no longer receiving \$168. But that's what was helping her close the gap.

And we got a call in our office just the other day from a woman receiving \$800 a month. So you know, the average is not what people are receiving.

Because of the study, we know how the rise is in terms of costs, in terms of seniors; we know it's an average of 14 percent across all the counties. However, unique counties like Passaic -- to live in a one-bedroom apartment -- their expenses have gone up 22 percent over five years.

The Elder Index does some other things, though. It also highlights the ability of both Federal and State programs to improve the quality of life of seniors, and their economic security, for those living on the edge of poverty. Food and nutrition programs -- which we are talking about today -- not only offer quality food, but also enable seniors to use their limited dollars for their other costs, like housing.

You'll see on one of the pages here that I've provided -- that you can see a bar chart about how you can improve the quality of life of a senior -- that ideal \$15,000 woman who's receiving Social Security -- how she can apply for public benefit programs. She can apply for PAAD, she can apply for SNAP and other food programs, she can apply for subsidies -- Medicare subsidies, and a variety of other things.

So she starts at 52 percent economically secure, okay? And by applying for these programs, she can become 79 percent economically secure. The only piece -- which we're really not talking about today -- the

only piece that can help her close the gap is affordable housing -- which is, hopefully-- Senator Vitale might also include that in his work.

SENATOR GORDON: We're going to do a hearing on that too.

MS. EGAN: Yes; there will be a hearing on that too.

SENATOR GORDON: But that's another session.

MS. EGAN: That's right.

But what I want to say, too, is there's been a great improvement, which we've heard about today. When we did our work in 2008, we knew that 64,000 seniors were enrolled in SNAP. Today, that's doubled; there are over 122,000 seniors enrolled in SNAP. That's a great improvement, because of the outreach that was done by the PAAD program. We know that 123,000 seniors are enrolled in PAAD; we know that 18,000 seniors are enrolled in Senior Gold, which has higher income eligibility. The reality of it is, is that the Medicare subsidy program -- which really looks at seniors who are actually at 100 percent of the Federal poverty level -- is only at 21,000 seniors. And I say this because those who are most economically insecure are over age 75, and over age 85. They're further away from their earning years; they had to spend their assets. And in reality, that 21,000 number should be higher. And it's because they really-- It's an outreach issue; it's a public awareness issue; and I think that's what you really need to walk away with here in terms of understanding the transparency issues, but also the ability to reach those and target those most vulnerable.

So that's really the closing piece I have, in terms of looking at how we can improve programs -- which is to heighten the awareness, to

improve the access pathways -- which we've talked about here today -- and to reduce the barriers.

So I really appreciate your going over this issue.

And in your packets you'll see the State Elder Index, and you'll see the State demographics that go along with it.

So thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: Thank you very much, Ms. Egan.

Mr. Rodriguez.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Thank you, Chairman Gordon; and thank you Committee members for leading us in this discussion today.

I have the distinct pleasure of serving as the Executive Director of the FoodBank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties. And I would like to focus today -- just to kind of bring a different lens, if you would, to some of what my colleagues have already discussed.

And it's going to center around two things: first, the increased need that we've experienced -- not just in our two counties, but across the state, as you heard from both Dennis, and Ms. Egan, and the colleagues before them. But also into the unique aspect that we have and the unique challenges that we have in administering these programs. I think we've heard how these programs, especially SNAP, make an immediate impact -- not just to the families that we're trying to serve, but also to the community and the economy around those families.

You know, as a food bank, our main activity -- what we're mostly known for is the distribution of emergency food. And we have certainly done that. We have seen an increase, a significant increase among the families that we serve in just two counties. Since the years before the

recession, and through the additional impact of Superstorm Sandy, until now, we've increased from 4 million meals served in 2007, to more than 10 million meals served just last year. Again, it's not hard to understand why. We had a tremendous recession; and, on top of that, we had the impact of Superstorm Sandy. We also feel, in the southern regions of Ocean County, what's going on in Atlantic City as well. So we're very much trying to rebuild; our families are trying to rebuild their lives.

But that's not all that we do. You can't just keep providing emergency food and think that that's the way we're going to end hunger. We want to get at the root causes. And one way that we started -- and we really doubled down on our efforts, especially after Sandy -- is to look at initiatives that help shorten these lines. The cornerstone of these initiatives is helping with SNAP outreach. And we have a tremendous collaboration with our local County Administrators and with our community agencies that work with us to help, one, create the outreach and the awareness to the families that never imagined that these programs would be available for them. They don't associate with them. They actually find their pantry first; and the reason for that is, many of them used to volunteer at those pantries. So we help bridge the gap of understanding that some of these resources are there for them. And then we also help, because we help them bundle -- fill out the application process, and help them, really, with the very onerous verification process that goes along with it.

This is a win-win for both the clients who we serve; for the administrators who we work with, since they get a nicely prepared packaged of applications that they can process. Because keep in mind, at the same time that the caseloads have been going up, their resources have actually

been going down in terms of being able to manage. So they're having to do more with less; and, as we've heard, with very antiquated systems, or systems and processes that really could use a refresh.

So this has been our approach: Connect families, not only with SNAP, but we also work-- And I'd like to thank the Committee members and the Senators here today for helping to do an Earned Income Tax Credit match, because we help families with free tax assistance. We actually launched a first-ever volunteer income tax assistance program in Ocean County. And we also help families enroll into public and private health care by serving as one of the navigators.

So we have a very comprehensive approach to getting to the root cause of hunger in our community -- which is, simply, not that there isn't food; we have some great markets in Monmouth and Ocean counties. But families lack the financial ability to go and access that food. So the next thing is to help them with at least these resources as they look to rebuild their lives.

So we've worked on this comprehensive outreach model: everything from screening to assembling the required documents, as I mentioned; to assisting clients, not only at food pantries, but also at WIC clinics and other community centers. In our last fiscal year, ending in June of 2015, we were able to submit no less than 1,500 new SNAP applications, in just two counties, on behalf of these clients; as well as assist another 700 households with interim reports -- renewals, updates, and other issues related to obtaining and keeping the SNAP benefit.

We also, as I mentioned, have a strong collaborative relationship with our county offices. So when we identify issues, we work

with them to help process different issues. But I can tell you, at the root cause of this is that we have an increase of caseload at a time when we've had diminishing resources at the county level to, maybe, deal with that. And our counties have made investment. Despite the recession, despite the different challenges on budget that the storm has built, they've made investments to try to bring in different temporary workers or part-time workers at times, and do some hiring as well.

So what else can we do? One of the things that we can do is really look at the overall program. The county administers the program and the application process; but the program is owned, if you would, at the State level. So when we talk about Heat and Eat policy, when we talk about the issues of ABAWD, what we're talking about -- and it was so eloquently mentioned before -- is, are we doing things that unnecessarily make a complex program more complex, adding administrative burdens or challenges to an already burdened system? Or are we creating more accessible pathways to clients that simply want to get back on their feet?

You know, we speak a lot about the clients; and Ms. Egan mentioned, and Dennis mentioned exactly who these folks are. In Monmouth and Ocean counties -- and I think you'll find the same throughout the state -- more than 60 percent of the families that we serve have at least one member with work income. And in 3 out of 10 of those households, there are 2 members who have work income. These are working families. There are working families that wound up with half the employment scenario in their household than they originally had, and are now trying to make ends meet; or in the case of our community in Monmouth and Ocean, are rebuilding their homes while they're paying rent

and a mortgage. And they've just stretched out whatever resources they have, because we know this is a long-term process.

So what can we do to really be better administrators of this program? I think the conversation today has focused on making sure that when there are easy policy choices to make, let's take them. Let's not add comprehensive administrative processes where they're, perhaps, not needed.

I think the ABAWD issue is a good one. If families are, in fact, working, if they're willing to engage in activity, why add the administrative burden, at the county level, to be able to do the tracking? Is it necessary? Are we not already accomplishing that goal? Where is the thought that our neighbors in need are already not willing to participate in these activities? Dennis mentioned a very different reality, and it's a reality that we echo in the communities that we served.

So what are we to do? I think the bigger issue here -- bigger than the Heat and Eat policy -- and Chairman, I think you mentioned it -- what is our vision, what is our roadmap to really creating strong policy that creates accessible programs; so that not only our neighbors in need can benefit from them, but our local economy can, in fact, benefit what they need so they can keep rebuilding, and it could be the economic engine that it's designed to be.

When we start making policy decisions, or not taking waivers where waivers are designed to simplify the program, we, in fact, create barriers to applications. And it's a barrier that's felt -- and we see it at our county level, and we've heard it echoed here on this panel -- it's felt by the clients, but it's felt by the county workers and the administrators. We have a lot of opportunity in New Jersey to modernize the way we deliver services

to be more effective, to be more efficient, so that every dollar that we invest has the most impact in our community and in the families that it's designed to do.

You know, I had the distinct pleasure of speaking about the importance of these programs -- SNAP, in particular -- yesterday at the White House. And one of the things that I was very happy to be able to share is that, in fact, in New Jersey and our in our communities, we care about our neighbors in need; we do. I think when I sit with our local elected officials -- and I'm sorry Senator Kyrillos isn't still here; he's a long-time champion for our neighbors in need, and to the FoodBank of Monmouth and Ocean Counties -- we like to solve problems together. When we sit down with our county administrators, they try to solve problems within the constraints that they have. We need an approach that's a lot more comprehensive -- not just for SNAP, but for all of our programs -- that's going to allow the limited resources we have at the county level to work the most effectively. And it's going to create a more streamlined pathway for clients, not just to access one program, but multiple programs.

And we look forward to continuing this conversation, not just with the legislative body, but also at the Executive level, and with the Commissioner -- Acting Commissioner, to be able to continue to grow this partnership.

It's not rocket science. These systems have been improved in neighboring states and around the country before we needed to. So there are a lot of lessons to learn. But I think, now, we need to commit to getting this job done in a different, more comprehensive way than, perhaps, we've

been approaching it to this point. If not, our lines are going to get longer, and there is not enough donated food to take care of our neighbors.

We cannot erode these programs. Emergency food does not have the same economic impact that the SNAP program does, that the Earned Income Tax Credit does, or that enrolling a family in public health insurance does.

So I think the bigger conversation here is, not make policy choices that make things more complex; but let's look above -- what, in fact, are we doing to run a more effective and efficient program, with SNAP and with others, in a way that's going to really reduce the administrative burden.

Thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: Thank you very much, Mr. Rodriguez
Senator Weinberg.

SENATOR WEINBERG: Yes, I'm going to have to leave to join Senator Whelan at another Committee meeting, for which we are already overdue.

But I want to thank the panelists who came here, and thank you for putting this together.

And, you know, I'm a big believer in the big visions; but I'm also a believer in we have to take the steps, in the meantime, while we're planning a larger vision.

So certainly, it would seem to me, what's in our realm in the state to do quickly is, number one, the waivers. Well, I'm not ranking them in order of importance, but as I think of them. And certainly the

simplification of this bizarre application process, which is something that should be able to be implemented with not a lot of work.

So through you, Mr. Chair, I hope our Committee will reach out and get at least those two suggestions in the pipeline, and back to us in a fairly reasonable length of time.

SENATOR GORDON: Right, right. I think those are excellent ideas.

SENATOR WEINBERG: And again, thank you.

You know, I've seen several of these people; I, unfortunately, see you on too many panels, as this problem continues to grow. And I know what goes on in the food banks we have right in Bergen County, again; and the tremendous pressure on people to get help, besides giving out the emergency food. I think you said emergency food is certainly not the answer, but it's the important one at that moment.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: That's correct.

SENATOR WEINBERG: So thank you all for all the work you do -- staying on the frontlines of something that, as you can see by the attention we've gotten (gestures to audience), is not exactly a sexy issue. (laughter)

MS. EGAN: Thank you.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: Let me add my thanks as well; and my commitment that we are going to follow up with this. We're going to try to address those things that we can do in the short run. The waiver issue.

I do think that, Mr. Rodriguez, you raised a number of good points about what needs to be done in the longer term about trying to deal

with things in a more comprehensive way -- in modernizing the systems that support these programs, streamlining the process. I think there's great value in learning what other states have done. We don't have to reinvent the wheel.

One thought that I have is that I think we should explore getting a meeting organized between the key stakeholder organizations and the Administration, and just get everyone in the same room and talk about how we can address these problems, in the short run, so that those lines don't get any longer.

With that, I'm going to adjourn the meeting. This has been a very thought-provoking program today.

While we're very interested in learning what goes wrong, particularly in the Executive branch, we want to fix these things; we just don't want to point fingers. We want to find solutions to these program issues, and, in the end, help people get the services that they need and deserve.

So thank you all very much.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Thank you.

SENATOR GORDON: The meeting is adjourned.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)