

Chairman Roberts and Senator Stabenow, thank you for inviting me to testify. I appreciate the opportunity to tell you about my story and how the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP has helped my family.

My name is Faith Watson. I'm from Greenville, Michigan, a rural community of about 9,000 people located in western Michigan. Honestly, I never thought that I would be in a position to be testifying about my experience as a SNAP participant. I have a bachelor's degree from Cornerstone University. I'm an adventurous go-getter. I have always cared about other people and have tried to give back to my community through service and through my church. I worked hard throughout my twenties -- first at a news radio program in Grand Rapids and then a variety of jobs as I moved around the country with my husband. Even when I took a job at a Starbucks in a new town, I quickly worked my way up to a shift manager. But, life doesn't always work out as you expect.

Almost two years ago, I found myself separated from my husband and I became the sole caregiver to and wage earner for my two young children. I had been a stay at home mom for several years and was completely unprepared for this unexpected change in our lives. All at once, I had to find work and sort out how I would manage to raise two small children on my own.

I found a part-time sales position at a large retail chain. It was only minimum wage, but it was a job that helped me get back on my feet. I also applied for help at the local Department of Health and Human Services. I was approved and qualified for about \$300 a month in SNAP benefits. It was a huge weight off my mind to get that help. Because of SNAP, I knew I could put food on the table and still pay my other bills. It also meant that I could afford to give my kids some special treats, like their favorite squeezable yogurt snack. Eating healthy foods has always been important, and SNAP just made that easier to do.

Each day moves us forward. Today things look very different for us. It's still hard to juggle it all, but we are much better. I have a part time position as a communications coordinator at a local civic organization, which is the field my degree is in! I also do some temporary work for my church. I volunteer at my son's school and my daughter's pre-school. And, I am slowly but steadily growing a home business as part of a health and wellness direct sales company. Because I'm earning more, my SNAP benefit is now about \$120 a month. It still makes a big difference in our family budget. Knowing that I have this help lets me create an environment for my kids where they are safe, secure, and thriving.

SNAP's benefit to my family has been about more than just groceries. This

little bit of security lets me think forward to the future. I don't plan to be in this situation forever. And, I don't know how long it will take me to get out of this, but it's something I think about every day. My goal is to be in a place where I'm financially independent, to provide for my kids without needing help, and to be in a place where I can give back to my community both financially and with my time. SNAP has helped me take steps toward that goal of a different kind of future.

I know that I'm not the only one who is struggling to make ends meet. My county has one of the highest poverty rates in Michigan. I see many single moms working several part-time jobs and barely making it. I'm always quick to encourage them to apply for SNAP to help them get by and care for their kids.

There is definitely a lot of good the program does, but there is stigma about those who depend on SNAP benefits. There seems to be a pervasive stereotype about what kind of person uses SNAP – they're lazy, don't care, don't work. But that's just not me and it's not the people that I know who have needed government assistance. We are hard workers who want a different future.

Of course, the program is not perfect. The application process and eligibility redetermination are tedious and highly involved, with all the paperwork taking a lot of time to gather and submit. The state needs so much proof of

everything that's going on in my life to calculate my benefits--from employer statements, to child care expenses, paystubs, bank info, utility bills, and more! The state's website technology also leaves much to be desired, repeatedly crashes in the middle of entering required information, is not user friendly, and often fails to deliver uploaded documents. Hopefully this will get better over time.

Reducing paperwork would be something participants and case workers would likely both agree could improve the process. Another improvement could be to avoid reducing SNAP benefits immediately after a participant reports an increase in their income, which seems more like a punishment for working more and trying hard to get ahead. Instead, allowing a short window of time of stable benefits, which could potentially help participants get back on their feet faster.

I hope that sharing my experience helps you appreciate the importance of this program to families like mine that really do need help, and that my story can help inform your work on writing next year's Farm Bill. Please know that for many of us, it's a lifeline that we didn't know we would need, and it provides stepping stones that are a key to future success. Thank you for providing the benefit. It's made a huge difference to my family.

I welcome any questions that you might have. Thank you for your time.