



Creating Communities. Changing Lives.

March 2012

My name is Richard Gitlen and I am the Vice President for Community Based Services at Liberty Lutheran and the Executive Director of Lutheran Children and Family Service. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to testify regarding asset testing for the SNAP program. By providing this testimony I hope that I can convey to you how important the SNAP program is to our clients and how asset testing might adversely affect them.

Last year **Liberty Lutheran** provided services to over **49,000** children, families, and seniors through its dynamic array of community-based, residential, and in-home medical and nonmedical services. Driven by our mission to faithfully provide vital resources for individuals and families facing life-changing situations, from the earliest stages of life through the many stages of aging, Liberty staff work diligently to enhance the lives of all we touch.

As the Vice President for Community Services, I maintain responsibility for **Lutheran Children and Family Service** and **Lutheran Congregational Services**, which serve more than **43,000** people throughout the eastern tier of the state. Lutheran Children and Family Service, serving Philadelphia and the surrounding counties, provides services to newly arrived immigrants and refugees, foster children and their families, adoptive parents, first-time mothers needing nursing care, out-of-school unemployed youth, families with abuse and neglect issues, truant children, and seniors using our community-based senior centers. **Lutheran Congregational Services**, located in Allentown, serves thousands throughout the year through its warehousing-distribution ministry to low-income families, disaster-response work, small-group grief-support and marriage-preparedness services, and a full array of support services to members in over **400** congregations in Northeast Pennsylvania.

Liberty Lutheran and in particular its affiliates, Lutheran Children and Family Service and Lutheran Congregational Services, serve a significant amount of people who utilize the SNAP program to help them survive on a day to day basis. Most of our clients in Philadelphia experience the impact of intergenerational poverty and abuse. Many live at the poverty level or barely above it and struggle to survive in neighborhoods that are riddled with violence, limited health care options, underachieving schools, and poor housing conditions. With limited resources they work to achieve a better life for themselves and their families. Whether going to school, training for a job, or working in low-paying jobs, our families seek what we all seek and that is a better life for their children and family. Unfortunately, many are working on the margin and rely on government programs like SNAP and food pantries to make ends meet. Reinstating the asset test for food stamps and potentially removing this benefit may move them further into poverty and despair and may further strain an already overused emergency food network.

Because of limited job skills, many of the adults we work with move in and out of employment. Realizing the volatility in the job market, they need to ensure that they have assets that will allow them to weather the economic downturns that they experience. Though not substantial, assets such as a savings account or a second car work to cushion the blow when between jobs. Families use saved dollars to pay for essentials such as clothing for their children, groceries above what is supported by food stamps, medical care, and a variety of daily living needs. In fact, they do what every economic advisor says and that is to **try and save enough money to get you through tough times in a tough job market**. Asset testing may well discourage savings and make a vulnerable population of citizens even more vulnerable.

250 North Bethlehem Pike • Ambler, PA 19002

Instead of being able to use food stamps, families will have to rely on their minimal savings to buy food and meet the ongoing needs of their families. This would seem counterintuitive to our desire to bring people out of poverty and to a more secure financial base.

Seniors, after a lifetime of working, raising their children, and supporting their communities, often end up living on limited and fixed incomes. Many find their way to our senior centers, where our staff listen to them talk about their great needs and their inability to meet their daily living requirements, be it food, home repairs, or medical needs. They come to our Centers looking for companionship and at least one hot meal a day. They also visit our food banks to get enough food to survive. These are not wealthy people; they have very limited assets. But, they also know how important it is to have something put away for a rainy day. Most have worked all their lives and have modest if any savings. Programs like SNAP help them stretch their already-limited dollars. By asset testing for food stamps, we run the risk of removing their limited safety net and requiring them to use their valuable assets to stretch their grocery bill at the expense of meeting their needs such as rent, utilities, or medicine.

Refugee programs assist persons who have fled persecution in their home countries and who arrive here eager to start their lives again. Over 70% are employed within the first 180 days of arrival, assisted by LCFS employment specialists. Early employment, however, does not mean early family self-sufficiency. Food stamps are crucial to family survival. Through hard work and family and community support, some refugee families are able to build up assets to move up the economic ladder while overcoming the obstacles that a new country imposes. The proposed SNAP asset testing would be a tremendous disincentive for newly arrived families eager to work to achieve the American Dream. It would punish families for attempting to improve their own lives and would increase hunger among those who have benefitted our state tremendously through their hope and hard work.

In conclusion, I hope that my remarks express the very real need to maintain the SNAP program as it is and not reinstate the asset test for food stamps. Asset testing, as I've shown, would adversely affect a significant amount of the people we serve. Whether working parents, children, newly arrived refugees, or seniors, many of our clients rely on food stamps to escape poverty, feed their families, and stretch already limited resources a little further. We ask all of our citizens to save money to address unforeseen circumstances and emergencies. By requiring this asset test, we will discourage savings and potentially keep people in a continual state of poverty.

Respectfully submitted by:



Richard Gitlen
Vice President Community Based Services
Executive Director Lutheran Children and Family Service