



Testimony of Tom Silva, Community Advocacy Specialist, Foodlink Inc.

Public Hearing on the New York Health Act, Rochester, NY

October 10, 2019

Who We Are

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the vital issue of health insurance and medical coverage in New York State. My name is Tom Silva, and I am the Community Advocacy Specialist at Foodlink here in Rochester. Foodlink is a community food resource center and the Feeding America food bank serving Allegany, Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Seneca, Wayne, Wyoming, and Yates counties. Our mission is to leverage the power of food to end hunger and build healthier communities.

Foodlink is the backbone of the emergency food network in Rochester and the 10 surrounding counties. We work with hundreds of partner organizations to distribute over 19 million pounds of food annually in our service area. This network of food pantries, homeless shelters, and hot meal programs work to ensure that everyone who walks through their door is fed and nourished. Our community kitchen produces over 3,500 meals every day for low-income children across the City of Rochester. The Curbside Market, our mobile farmers market, visits over 90 locations every week and conducted over 40,000 transactions last year to help residents in underserved communities access fresh produce. Our market and other community health programs work in partnership with several hospitals, family medicine centers, and federally qualified health centers to connect low-income individuals at risk of diet-related illnesses to fresh, affordable produce as part of their treatment plans. In many ways, Foodlink is partially responsible for the health care and wellbeing of the most vulnerable groups in our region. For this reason, we believe it is our responsibility to speak today in favor of the New York Health Act to guarantee medical coverage to our clients, program participants, and all New Yorkers.



Why We Are Here

Food insecurity refers to the USDA's measure of lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members; and limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods. Food insecurity often reflects a household's need to make trade-offs between important basic needs, such as health care, and purchasing nutritionally adequate foods.

According to Map the Meal Gap, Feeding America's study of hunger nationwide, over 2.2 million (or 11.4% of) New Yorkers are food insecure for at least part of the year. Right here in the City of Rochester, the rate jumps to 25%. In the poorest zip codes, such as 14608, that number jumps again to 40%. Among food-insecure households, reduced access to nutritious foods increases the risk for poor health and chronic disease such as diabetes and hypertension. Food insecurity can also cause people to skip or delay medication, refills, and preventative health visits – complicating disease self-management and continuing the cycle of poor health. Food insecurity is also associated with increased health care utilization with regards to emergency department visits, inpatient visits, and length of pay, contributing to up to 3.4 billion dollars in additional health care costs annually.

In many ways, one of the best ways to lower health care costs in New York would be to decrease food insecurity through programs and policies that put food, knowledge, and money directly into the hands of people experiencing food insecurity. While that would help large numbers of people, it would not solve some of our clients' most pressing issue: the skyrocketing costs of health care services and their lack of ability to pay for them. Feeding America's Hunger Study (conducted in 2014), showed that that 66% of households reported choosing between paying for food and medical care each year. 30% made that tradeoff every month. The report also found that 55% of surveyed clients at emergency food programs across the country had unpaid medical bills. To quote their report directly:



“Even with insurance, unpaid medical bills can accumulate due to deductibles and uncovered care. Most household compositions show high levels of unpaid medical bills, but the burden is highest among households containing at least one child and at least one senior, at 64.9 percent. The group with the lowest rate of unpaid medical bills is households with at least one senior, in which nearly half (49.6 percent) of households still face unpaid bills.” – Feeding America Hunger Study, 2014, page 120

These issues are personal for Foodlink’s program participants. Just two weeks ago, I conducted a focus group with clients at the HOPE Center Keuka Food Pantry in Penn Yan about the reasons they needed emergency food that month. Almost everyone had a story about unpaid medical bills from their own family or strangers they met in line at their local pantry. One woman’s husband was recently diagnosed with diabetes and was prescribed a medication that would have cost them \$500 out of pocket monthly. When she told the doctor that they couldn’t afford it, the doctor said ‘well you have terrible insurance,’ to which she responded ‘well that’s the best we can afford.’ After berating them for drawing down on social security, the doctor said that her husband would likely die soon anyway and it wasn’t worth pursuing other treatment. While this doctor is probably an outlier, the failure of the private insurance market to meet the health care needs of people in our region certainly is not.

What We Ask

Because we cannot eliminate hunger without addressing the health care crisis, we have come to give public testimony today in support of the New York Health Act. Eliminating private insurance and providing single payer coverage will lower the cost of both treatment and medication, leaving more money in people’s pockets for food, education, and other necessities. We believe that this bill will offer all New Yorkers the best chance at receiving comprehensive medical coverage that will allow them to become healthy and self-sufficient. Because this legislation is a critical step in moving our communities from hunger to health, we urge you to pass and implement the New York Health Act.

