

Women in poverty deserve a ‘place at the table’

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WACO—American women in poverty deserve a place at the table to influence public policy that affects their lives and becomes “inscribed in the brains” of their children, a child nutrition advocate told the Together at the Table [Hunger Summit](#) at Baylor University.

One child in four under age 6 in the United States lives in a food-insecure household, and that creates a major public health crisis with a lasting impact, said Mariana Chilton, director of the Center for Hunger-Free Communities at the Drexel University School of Public Health.



Mariana Chilton

“Food insecurity has an indelible impact on the cognitive, social and emotional development of young children,” Chilton said.

Economic hardship equals poor health, she insisted, adding, “Food stamps are good medicine, but the dosage is not high enough.”

However, more public assistance alone cannot solve the problem of hunger in the United States, she asserted.

Five years ago, Chilton founded the “[Witnesses to Hunger](#)” research project to increase the participation of women—particularly poor

women—in national dialogue on hunger and poverty. The project gives mothers and other caregivers of children digital cameras to record their experiences living in poverty and provides them avenues to tell their stories.

“What do the women tell us? They want to break the cycle. They want off welfare,” she said.

Nonstandard work hours, seasonal work and unstable income create food insecurity, because less-than-full-time employment often provides just enough income to disqualify families from government benefits but not enough to offset the loss of those benefits, she noted.

Families who try to save money to pay for education to get out of poverty are penalized for their savings, and those who seek to supplement their income are punished for their entrepreneurship, she observed.

Chilton endorsed a multifaceted approach to addressing poverty that includes microfinance, peer support, financial education and matched incentives for savings.

Audrey Rowe, administrator with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service in Washington, D.C., told the Hunger Summit several challenges face low-income Americans in the near future.

First, she noted, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients were set to experience an immediate reduction in benefits effective Nov. 1, when a temporary boost from the 2009 stimulus was due to expire.

Second, the future of SNAP benefits remains uncertain. The Senate voted to cut \$4 billion in SNAP funding over the next decade, while the House of Representatives cut \$39 billion over that period. That difference still must be reconciled in conference committee.

"Legislators need to hear how important SNAP is to 47 million people in this country," most of them children or elderly, Rowe said.

Furthermore, the threat of another government shutdown in early 2014 remains a possibility, she noted. The failure of Congress to appropriate funds and raise the debt limit caused a 16-day government shutdown in October.

In spite of furloughs, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service managed to keep assistance flowing to low-income families in October. However, an extended shutdown could have created a crisis, she noted.

The Texas Hunger Initiative—a program within the Baylor School of Social Work, launched in cooperation with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission—and the USDA southwest regional office sponsored the hunger summit.

The summit included more than 40 breakout sessions focused on best practices in community organizing, research and child nutrition advocacy, along with sessions on public policy, health and nutrition.