

Written Testimony of Barbara J. Petee, Executive Director, The Root Cause Coalition and Chief Advocacy and Government Relations Officer, ProMedica

With more than 17.5 million U.S. households facing hunger — or one in every seven households nationwide — healthcare systems and leaders must recognize that lacking nutritious food to eat is a dire public health concern. Food insecurity and its results, including true hunger, is a health issue causing distress in communities nationwide by taking a toll across the age spectrum.

Hunger is a problem healthcare providers see every day among patients of all ages in emergency rooms, clinics, offices, and hospital beds. Babies born to malnourished mothers may be underweight, have developmental delays and continue to have health problems throughout life. Children experiencing food insecurity, meaning they live in households that at times are unable to acquire adequate food, are more likely to have behavioral health issues such as anxiety and depression. These children may also be at higher risk for developing chronic health conditions, including anemia and asthma.

Among the elderly, another particularly vulnerable group, malnutrition increases disability and decreases resistance to infection. Both not only harm quality of life, but they extend hospital stays. People who are food insecure often have irregular eating patterns, which can lead to being overweight and obese. Additionally, people facing food insecurity typically consume food with fewer nutrients, so they have dietary shortfalls linked to the development of hypertension, diabetes and other chronic diseases¹.

“For critically and chronically ill people, food is medicine,” opens a Harvard Law School Center for Health Law & Policy Innovation paper presenting the case for nutritional counseling and medically-tailored, home-delivered meals. “With adequate amounts of nutritious food, people who are sick have a better response to medication, maintain and gain strength, and have improved chances of recovery. Ultimately, access to healthy food leads to improved health outcomes and lower healthcare costs.”

With the Affordable Care Act (ACA) changing the way the healthcare industry does business, hospital administrators and physicians must look beyond our four walls more than ever before in modern medicine. Preventing illness, improving population health and eliminating health disparities are critical for the shift both for clinical and social reasons. In many ways, the healthcare industry, while accelerating as necessary in technology to deliver state-of-the-art care that helps ensure safe and affordable care, must concurrently return to its charitable roots of more than a century ago, when hospitals were community pillars concerned with basic public health needs and overall health and welfare. The industry needs a unified system of common goals that builds from the fundamentals of health and wellness that value one’s overall health.

Incentive models that make the healthy choice the easy choice are critical to improving the health status of our citizens. By increasing access to nutritious and affordable food, we can have a significant positive impact on health while at the same time decreasing healthcare costs.

¹ *Addressing Hunger to Essential to Improving Health*, Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease and ProMedica, March 2013.

HUNGER IS A HEALTH ISSUE

Breaking out the health care costs of hunger

Costs of hunger-induced illnesses, 2007 and 2010, in billions of 2010 dollars

Adverse health condition	2007	2010	Increased cost over three years
Poor health (excluding items below)	\$28.7	\$38.9	\$10.2
Depression	\$2.2	\$29.2	\$7.1
Suicide	\$15.8	\$19.7	\$3.9
Anxiety	\$12.9	\$17.4	\$4.5
Hospitalizations	\$12.1	\$16.1	\$4.0
Upper gastrointestinal disorders	\$4.2	\$5.7	\$1.4
Colds, migraines, and iron deficiency	\$2.5	\$3.5	\$1.0
Total illness costs caused by hunger	\$98.4	\$130.5	\$32.1

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The healthcare industry must not only deliver clinical excellence and efficiency, we must hone in on how we can act as catalysts, innovators and leaders to improve the health of our entire communities. ProMedica has taken steps to improve nutrition and access to healthy foods that are a great complement to the nutrition incentive programs offered by the USDA.

As our industry battles epidemics of low birth weight, childhood obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and other chronic diseases – we, like many healthcare providers across the country, began to ask why. Why are we seeing such high rates of these issues in our community? From this simple question – ProMedica began a journey that, in partnership with the AARP Foundation, founded The Root Cause Coalition to bring the full power of the healthcare community to bear in addressing the social determinants of health.

That is why the work of this Subcommittee to strengthen our nation’s nutrition policy is so vitally important. Your work on these basic building blocks, especially the SNAP program, have far reaching impacts on a plethora of issues at the foundation of a strong future for our country. The programs overseen by this Committee are about more than the immediate needs of hungry children, adults, and seniors. These programs are core investments in the health and wellbeing of your constituents and our nation’s ability to adapt to an ever changing global economy.

We know that hunger is a health issue, we know that food is the best medicine, and we know that the SNAP program is helping to address the immediate needs of the most vulnerable in our

² Shepard, D., Setren, E., and Cooper, D. Hunger In America: Suffering We All Pay For, Center for American Progress, October 2011.

communities. We also know that Congress, and programs such as SNAP are not – and should not – be the only solution. SNAP is an essential safety net that MUST remain strong to ensure the most vulnerable in our communities do not fall through the cracks. But the healthcare industry must also be part of a more permanent solution to addressing basic needs, as well.

That is why we – at ProMedica – have begun to screen patients for food insecurity in our acute care and physician office settings. We have food pharmacies that replace the cycle of medicine being used to treat conditions that nutritious food can treat more effectively. ProMedica has even eliminated a food desert in Toledo's inner city, by opening a 5,000 square-foot grocery that is now being used as a model not only for food access and affordability, but for job training and economic growth. And, through The Root Cause Coalition, we are working with organizations across our community, and across the country, that showcase creative, effective partnerships in addressing food insecurity, nutrition education and even economic development, so that every citizen has the opportunity to reach his or her highest potential.

In partnership with all sectors, the healthcare industry must make fundamental changes. As key economic drivers in most communities, we should use our might to improve population health through an array of collaborations and innovations targeted to meet each community's needs. Health care must be integrated and focus on the most common social determinants, starting with nutrition and hunger, to ensure Americans have what they need to live productive lives. Strategic, purposeful and intentional changes can create an improved model to deliver better public health care.