

Joint Congressional Hunger Caucus/Legal Aid Caucus Briefing

July 20, 2022

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Congresswoman Scanlon and Chairman McGovern, thank you for the opportunity to participate and represent MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger at this event to examine the role of Legal Aid organizations in addressing food insecurity in the United States. Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart the responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst, without judgment or precondition. For over 37 years now, MAZON continues to advocate for an end to hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds, and in particular, we support solutions to end hunger for populations in the United States that are often overlooked and more likely to experience food insecurity including active-duty military families, veterans, Tribal communities, households headed by single mothers, LGBTQ+ older adults, and the people of Puerto Rico and the U.S. territories.

Over the course of nearly four decades of advocacy, we know that oftentimes what keeps people in a state of food insecurity is not just benefit inadequacy, but also barriers to accessing nutrition programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Barriers to access can include the difficulties of navigating an onerous application process that are so cumbersome they seem intended to limit access to SNAP, as well as the all-too-common perception that those attempting to avail themselves of the benefit may be stigmatized or discriminated against. The link between access to benefits and access to justice is clear. Access to food and nutrition services is a matter of liberty and freedom which often can only be accessed with the help of the judicial branch of our government for a whole host of reasons. What all of us know too well is that in reality, without an attorney to navigate the process in the event that benefits are wrongly denied, it is all too common that many people lose access to SNAP and other benefits, simply for lack of access to counsel. We strongly believe that fully funding legal services is important and necessary support in order to combat hunger in America.

One specific example where we hope the Legal Aid community can engage relates to the recent directive from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination. On May 5, 2022, The USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) [announced](#) that it will interpret the prohibition on discrimination based on sex found in Title IX and in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 to include discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. MAZON thanks the Biden Administration and USDA for this

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directive and the accompanying directives. While these actions taken by the Administration are important, long overdue, and show great sensitivity to a community that is often marginalized, much work remains to be done. We must ensure that there is adequate outreach to the LGBTQ+ community who have been turned away either by actual or perceived discrimination.

Given USDA's new directive, we encourage partners in the Legal Aid community to take two critical steps. First, it is imperative to continue outreach specifically to LGBTQ+ benefit applicants to ensure the community is aware of the new antidiscrimination directive. And second, all necessary steps must be taken to ensure that LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced discrimination while either applying for or availing themselves of a USDA Food Program are aware of and able to access legal assistance available to report past discrimination that will be investigated.

Conversations like these between experts, advocates, and policymakers are vital in addressing the scourge of hunger and we hope the information gathered here will help all of us commit to moving forward on long-term political solutions to finally ending food insecurity in America.