

September 18, 2013

Congressman Keith Rothfus
6000 Babcock Boulevard, Suite 104
Pittsburgh, PA 15237

Dear Congressman Rothfus:

Starvation has come to be known as a disease of French Revolutionaries, Donner Party pioneers, and impoverished third-world citizens. 21st Century America—the land of McDonald's, all-you-can-eat chicken wings, and widespread obesity—seems to have no place for such a dilemma. Yet in spite of our fast-food consumer culture, hunger has still managed to find a place in the growling bellies of one in five American children. Starving can no longer be cast aside as a trademark of less-fortunate foreigners and members of a bygone era. It is a real, life-threatening pandemic that is plaguing the lives of young Americans, crippling their futures, and plunging the country into an interminable cycle of suffering. It is a rumble in the stomach of young America that demands to be silenced.

The true breadth of childhood hunger in America is staggering. The global superpower that tops the international charts for its military, economy, and democracy simultaneously accounts for more than 16 million food insecure children. In a food insecure household, access to the nutrition necessary for a healthy lifestyle is inadequate and inconsistent. In other words, on any given night, 3.9 million American households may have no answer for the simple question, “What’s for dinner?” Some of the United States’ proudest gems, big cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, are responsible for the increased danger of children falling into food insecure homes. In large cities, a shocking twenty five percent of the households with kids are food insecure. But hunger does not discriminate. The 16 million starving children live on the streets of D.C., the wide open deserts of Arizona, and everywhere in between. Every night, in every one of our fifty states, children are going to bed hungry.

We have all felt hunger. It is an aching belly, a pounding headache, maybe even an onslaught of lightheadedness. The importance of food is understood from infants who wail for their mother’s breast milk to psychologists who determine the physiological needs on the first level of Maslow’s hierarchy. But as uncomfortable as hunger pangs may feel, there are certainly more painful circumstances on this Earth than stomachaches. Is there something more at stake? As it turns out, the full effects of hunger, especially for children, are nothing short of disastrous. A child’s nutrition in his first three years is absolutely crucial to his future physical and mental health. Children who suffer from food insecurity in the very early stages of their life are significantly more prone to learning

difficulties, behavioral and emotional problems, and illness than their well-fed counterparts. This lack of one of humanity's most primal necessities creates even more devastating, harder-to-remedy repercussions for hungry children's future academic achievement and economic productivity. The dismal chain of events begins with children coming to school hungry because of a lack of sufficient food at home, as reported by sixty-two percent of teachers. From there, their learning is impaired, their educational achievement is restricted and their ultimate economic attainment is crippled. As this deadly cycle keeps spinning out of control, children born into food insecure homes grow up with heartbreakingly high likelihoods of providing the same food insecure circumstances for their children. The problems with childhood hunger are extensive and devastating. Without a solution, they will remain constant, the most damaging problem of all.

Fortunately for one in five starving American children, the solution to childhood hunger does not require the same painstaking complexity as the cure to cancer or the key to world peace. Simply taking action to sufficiently provide healthy, nutritious meals to children at risk of food insecurity would decimate our nation's deplorable starvation statistics and diminish the dangers of hunger's threatening consequences. National and local programs are already in place, blazing the trail that, if followed diligently from trail marker to trail marker, could eventually eliminate childhood hunger in America. These programs include SNAP, school breakfast programs, and summer feeding programs—all addressing the key contributors to childhood hunger by providing healthy options and meals at the times that food insecure families struggle the most with providing adequate nutrition. To be fully effective, however, these programs need to reach every single child who sits at an empty table at dinnertime. For instance, while sixty-two percent of Feeding America client households participate in a National School Lunch Program, only fourteen percent are also enrolled in a summer feeding program. Likewise, 10.6 million of the children eligible for free or reduced school lunches go without this easy but crucial source of nutrition. In light of these bleak numbers, your colleagues' proposal to cut federal nutrition programs aimed to help at-risk children threatens not just a step in the wrong direction, but an enormous leap away from ending one of America's most easily-cured threats. Hungry children across the United States need more help from federal food services, not less. Extending these opportunities to every hungry young American helps them to secure the nutrition crucial to their growth and development into successful citizens. By taking this action, we could help fill the stomachs of hungry children and help them to fulfill their full potentials.

Starvation in the United States demands recognition as a widespread, highly-damaging threat to the future generation of Americans. As former president Bill Clinton once said, however, "there is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America." This can easily and effectively be the case with the American Childhood Hunger Pandemic, but dedication from citizens like me and leaders like you will be required to fill every empty belly. The next time you feel a pang of hunger in your stomach, I hope you consider passing the plate to your hungry young countrymen.

Thank you for your consideration,

Bret Anne Serbin