

Wearing his chef's uniform, Tulsa resident Bryan Parker choked back his emotions before a Congressional committee in testimony Thursday calling government food assistance "a lifesaver." The 51-year-old Tulsa resident, with shaky hands at times, his voice quivered on occasion and once he had to stop to take a deep breath as he told how he became to need benefits from the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. The Tulsa World published a profile on him Thursday. Parker, a graduate of Claremore High School, is a Navy veteran who served on the USS Midway from 1985 to 1988. After his service, he lived in Japan raising his family and managing English schools. He returned to Tulsa seven years ago to care for ailing parents. Having restaurant experience, Parker worked at a chain eatery for four years then was laid off. He couldn't find work and exhausted his unemployment benefits and savings. This happened while his father's health declined, dying two years ago. Parker was chosen to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry about his experiences using SNAP benefits. The committee is considering changes to the Farm Bill, which is passed every five years. "I've always been a hard worker and believe in it. I've always felt accomplished and successful. I've never worried about paying a bill, buying food or wondering where I was going to get the next meal. That was a thought that never crossed my mind," Parker told the committee. "But like many people do, I lost my job. It happened three to four years ago, and it was rough. I felt down on my luck, depression, I battled of anxiety. Every day it seemed to grow a little stronger. "You lose hope after a while. Every day that goes by without landing a job, it gets rougher. So while trying to find work, I had to find ways to cut spending. It wasn't too long before I could no longer afford to keep my car or home or anything for that matter. With each interview that went without the promise of a new job, the struggles just kept becoming more and more complicated. When it

seems no one is willing to give an opportunity for man, it's tough when you're 51. It is for anybody when you are looking for work, it's daunting. When you are trying to land these jobs, when you are working out of a cheap midtown motel, it gets even more difficult. SNAP during this time was a lifesaver. It provided nutrition. It gave me hope. A man can endure a lot of pain and suffering, but one thing that is almost impossible to ignore is hunger. It's hard to live up to your own responsibilities as a provider when you're not providing. I've very thankful for the SNAP program and the SNAP benefits I've received while trying to get back on my feet. I'm happy to say that someone has decided to give me a second chance." The nonprofit veteran group Coffee Bunker connected Parker to a housing program for veterans and the Lobek Taylor Culinary Trade Program offered at the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma. He will receive a food safety manager certificate, chef starter kit and ongoing support in his job hunt. Parker name-dropped the food bank's chef, Jeff Marlow, who teaches on the motto "AA&E" for "attitude, attendance and effort" as the "keys to life." Eventually, Marlow plans to get a food truck or head a restaurant's kitchen. "With hard work, really hard work, the training and my passion for cooking, my dream of owning my own business will become a reality. None of this would be possible without the help of the SNAP program and the Culinary Trade Program," he testified. "I see every day how important SNAP is to many lives in the community. Everyone needs to eat - not just the employed, the wealthy or the middle class. Everyone needs food. Food provides fuel and strength we need. SNAP helps those in need get one step closer to self-sufficiency. "Most don't consider hunger to be an obstacle. It's hard to unless you've been there. If it weren't for SNAP, I'd probably be homeless. That's not easy to say, I'm a proud man. Unless you've been there, you wouldn't understand. All you can do is focus on when

you might eat again or how you are going to come up with \$40

to stay in a cheap motel one more night. This is why SNAP is

important to me and people who need it. "Honestly, I believe anyone working middle

class individual is one life-altering change, event, bad event, away from being in the

same situation. One day, I want to be able to pay it forward, and

hopefully Iâ€™m doing that right now." Committee Chairman Pat Roberts, R-Kansas, responded: "From a

Marine to a Navy veteran, thank you for your service. Well done." In a

funny exchange, Roberts asked what Parker was going to offer Tulsans in his food

truck. Misunderstanding the question, Parker spoke about his current work at the food bank.

"We have quality ingredients, and we put it out on a daily basis with

pride. It means a lot to me. I thought Iâ€™d be walking into a

bunch of flour, sugar and dry goods, but thatâ€™s not the case at all.

Itâ€™s a pleasure to be there working with a lot of good people," Parker

said. Roberts then clarified to mean after Parker graduated the program. "Kansas is pretty

close. If youâ€™ve got something pretty good, I â€™ll come down," Roberts said. Chuckling,

Parker replied, âœBurgers to tacos. I have to wait there to figure it all

out. And you are more than welcome Mr. Chairman.â€• âœBrianâ€™s Burgers," Roberts suggested for

a name. âœOK thatâ€™s what weâ€™re going with," Parker said. âœI offer that at

no cost," said Roberts. Also testifying on the panel was Sam Schaffer, chief executive

officer and executive director of the New York City-based nonprofit Center for Employment Opportunities.

It is an evidence-based program matching every government dollar to get people trained and

employed. Schaffer urged the committee to continue funding SNAP Employment and Training program, maintain

the flexibility of the program and re-evaluate the time limits placed on some individuals.

âœAddressing food insecurity and employment through a single government intervention is aligned with what

we know about hunger and poverty,â€• Schaffer said. "Hungry people are incapable of focusing

on the things we ask them to - making a career plan, showing up

ready for work, being patient with coworkers and supervisors. Even motivated individuals cannot function well when their minds are occupied with when they will next eat.â€• Jimmy Wright, president of Wrightâ€™s Markets in Opelika, Alabama, testified on behalf of the National Grocer Association, calling the SNAP program one of the â€œmost important and efficient programs our nation offers.â€• He spoke about the need for government regulation to keep up with industry changes, such as when food stamps went from paper to electronic cards. For example, his market is participating in a pilot for online SNAP ordering and added a delivery service to get food to home-bound people particularly in rural areas plagued food deserts. To leverage community resources, the market partners with a local medical center to coordinate health checkups by having a physician or nurse ride along with scheduled deliveries. Wright cautions against placing unnecessary administrative regulations on the programs, such as attempts to further limit types of food consumed. â€œWhile we support the goal of promoting healthier eating, the implementation of such an idea would be completely unworkable for the independent supermarket community. The added regulatory burden and cost coupled with an inevitable stigma that our SNAP customers would face may put some grocers out of business and, therefore, make food insecurity worse," Wright said. Ginnie Graham 918-581-8376 ginnie.graham@tulsaworld.com T

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