STAFF REPORT: HEALTH, WELFARE, AND FOOD PROGRAMS

At its May hearing in Montgomery, the Commission heard testimony from many Negroes whose lives were unchanged by health, welfare, and food programs designed to improve the condition of the poor.

I. FOOD PROGRAMS

Although 14 of the counties in the 16-county hearing area have some type of government sponsored food program,[1] seven of the 14 have been designated "Hunger Counties" by the Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States.[2] To be cited as a Hunger County by the Board, 3 of the 4 following conditions had to exist: a postneonatal mortality rate twice as high as the national average; at least 40% of the people in the county in poverty; fewer than 25% of the poor participating in food stamp or commodity programs and less than 25% of the poor receiving welfare assistance.

In counties with a surplus commodity distribution program, Commission investigators found that many families were depending on the commodities as the primary source of food and thus were living on nutritionally-inadequate diets. Mrs. Pattie Mae Haynes who has six children, aged 1–13, and whose only income is a welfare payment of $117 a month, stated that she received grits, peas, meal, flour, canned beef, and lard under the commodity program and that these foods were usually the only thing the family had to eat. Some of the food items were provided in insufficient quantities to last the entire month.

In counties with a food stamp program, many families went hungry or bought food on credit from neighborhood stores because they did not have the money to buy the stamps—a particular problem in a noncash economy where many families earn less than $800 a year. Many were able to buy the stamps infrequently and then only at the sacrifice of other household necessities. Often the amount of food obtainable with the stamps did not last the entire month. Mrs. Helen Randale, who has six children and no husband, said she told the stamp distributors that she did not have any money to buy stamps and was told that "if I didn't have [any] income, I couldn't get any [stamps]." In order to feed her family, she had to rely on credit and donations from neighbors. Another witness who was unable to buy stamps regularly, Mrs. Mary Wade, testified that in order to buy the stamps she had to do without other necessities: "I have to put off a lot of bills or either borrow money from some of my friends and have to pay them back later on and pay interest on it."

Other witnesses testified that the amount of food they were able to purchase with the stamps was insufficient; at the end of the month, their meals consisted of milk and bread and turnip greens.

The Surplus Commodity Program

Section 32 of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933,[3] as amended, authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to spend 30 percent of the custom duties collected during the previous calendar year, plus up to $300 million of the unused balances from previous years to "encourage the domestic consumption of [agriculture] commodities or products by diverting them . . . from the normal channels of trade and commerce or by increasing their utilization through benefits, indemnities, donations or by other means, among persons in low income groups as determined by the Secretary of Agriculture." Section 416 of the Agricultural Act of 1949[4] authorizes the donation of commodities acquired through price support operations to needy persons. The Secretary of Agriculture established the Surplus Commodity Program as a means of implementing these legislative directives.

---

[1] Macon, Marengo, Monroe, Butler, Wilcox, Autauga, and Lowndes have a surplus food program and Bullock, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Perry, Sumter, and Choctaw have a food stamp program. A food stamp program for Clarke County has been approved but was not in operation at the time of the hearing. Barbour County has requested a food stamp program.

[2] Autauga, Bullock, Clarke, Dallas, Hale, Lowndes, Macon.

[3] 7 U.S.C. 612(c).

[4] 7 U.S.C. 1431.