

TESTIMONY OF THE GOVERNOR OF THE
COMMONWEALTH OF PUERTO RICO
HON. RAFAEL HERNANDEZ COLON
IN THE PUBLIC HEARINGS ON NUTRITIONAL PROGRAMS
TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE OF AGRICULTURE AND
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DOMESTIC MARKETING, CONSUMER
RELATIONS AND NUTRITION

FEBRUARY 28, 1992

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON D.C.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today about nutritional programs in the 1990 Farm Bill. I also wish to express my appreciation for the consideration this Committee has historically shown for your fellow citizens living in Puerto Rico.

I come before you, however, at a time when the needy U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico face an unconscionable threat to their health and well-being. As you know, in its 1991 budget proposal, the White House crafted a mischievous plan that would completely exclude Puerto Rico from any specific program for nutritional assistance. Rather than advancing a plan to restore Puerto Rico's full participation in the Food Stamp Program, which we had from 1974 to 1982, the OMB proposal recommends a drastic, permanent 15 percent cut in funding and transferring those funds out of USDA jurisdiction.

As of today the people of my Island are the only U.S. citizens anywhere who are not afforded the basic nutritional guarantees of the Food Stamp Program. Far too many of our people who would have full Food Stamp benefits if they lived in any U.S. state or jurisdiction receive no federal nutritional assistance at all in Puerto Rico.

Mr. Chairman, I know you would strongly agree that there is no justification for a policy that forces U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico to bear burdens of hunger and malnutrition from which all other Americans are spared. The time is overdue to put an end to this monumental inequity. It is time to restore Puerto Rico to full participation in the Food Stamp Program. I respectfully urge the Committee to reject the OMB proposal and to take all necessary steps to provide equal nutritional assistance to the needy citizens of Puerto Rico over the period of the 1990 Farm Bill.

From 1974 through 1982, Puerto Ricans were full participants in the Food Stamp Program. Then, in 1982, Puerto Rico was singled out and excluded from participation in the program. Instead, there was established a block grant with a funding cap, set 25 percent lower than under the Food Stamp Program and frozen for four years.

In order to bring costs within the cap, the Commonwealth was forced to restrict eligibility standards severely and to slash benefit levels. As a result, one hundred thousand families were cut out of the program. Moreover, while an average family of four receives a monthly allotment of \$331 in all other jurisdictions of the U.S., such a family receives only \$199 in Puerto Rico.

While available food benefits are less than those in the U.S., food costs are higher. Weekly food costs per household in Puerto Rico amount to \$76 compared to \$68 in the U.S. And that gap between U.S. and Puerto Rico food costs has been increasing. In fact, the U.S. government has recognized the higher cost of living in Puerto Rico by establishing a higher COLA rate for federal employees on the island.

Under the national Food Stamp Program a family with an annual income of \$15,732 or less is eligible for nutritional assistance, while in Puerto Rico the eligibility limit is only \$8,000. Let me underscore that Mr. Chairman: a family of four in Puerto Rico earning \$8,500 a year is not entitled to any help from NAP to feed their children.

Yet such a family living anywhere else would be entitled to full Food Stamp benefits. By "anywhere else," I

do not mean only the 50 states. It is important to understand that Guam, the Virgin Islands and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas all participate fully in the Food Stamp Program.

Indeed, it is incredible but true that non-U.S. citizens residing in any of the states receive more nutritional benefits than U.S. citizens residing in Puerto Rico. That means that someone who just arrived in New York City from the Middle East or Southeast Asia has a greater entitlement to basic federal protection against hunger than the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico.

Current per capita income in Puerto Rico is about one-third of the U.S. average and one-half of that of even the poorest state in the Union. Some 58% of all families in Puerto Rico have incomes below the federal poverty level, by contrast with 14% in the U.S. Two out of every three children in Puerto Rico live in poverty, as contrasted with one out of five on the U.S. mainland.

Not surprisingly, there are disturbing nutritional deficiencies in Puerto Rico. Of the ten first leading causes of death in Puerto Rico, inadequate nutrition is a contributing factor in six. A 1985 Congressionally-mandated evaluation of the Nutrition Assistance Program ("NAP") showed

deficiencies in iron, vitamin A, calcium and niacin. The restrictions on NAP have increased the percentage of households failing to meet the recommended daily allowance for caloric intake and key nutrients.

Puerto Rico's exclusion from the national Food Stamp Program has had other unintended, unjust effects. Last fall, Puerto Rico, North Carolina, South Carolina and the U.S. Virgin Islands were struck by the devastation of Hurricane Hugo. Emergency nutritional assistance was made available to the U.S. citizens of the Virgin Islands and the Carolinas left homeless by this unprecedented disaster. Yet those left homeless in Puerto Rico were denied this vital assistance.

The current inequitable situation not only profoundly harms the health and well-being of the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico but impacts the economic interests of the U.S. mainland as well. Puerto Rico is the third largest export market in the world for U.S. agriculture--after Japan and Canada. In 1987, Puerto Rico purchased \$1.3 billion of food and agricultural products from the U.S., representing more than 70 percent of all of its outside purchases of such products.

Mr. Chairman, given the critical need for improved nutrition in Puerto Rico, I found it incomprehensible that

the Administration's Fiscal 1991 budget not only fails to advance a plan for fairness, but actually recommends drastically slashing the current inadequate funding levels.

This recommendation may represent merely another set of numbers, another line item, to OMB. But to the people I serve, it means intolerable human suffering and misery.

This cruel and insensitive proposal, I respectfully suggest, is not merely another opening position in the normal cycle of the budget making process. It is not a good faith proposal for controlling costs or improving efficiency. Rather it shows profound disrespect for the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico, who are proud of their relationship with this country.

Mr. Chairman, my initial reaction was that such an outrageous proposal could only be the result of an oversight or computer error. But instead we found the Administration's true motivation for this proposal in the justification document released by the Office of Budget of HHS. That document states that the Administration proposal would "facilitate transition to any new political status Puerto Rico may choose under the President's self-determination goal...." That, of course, is a reference to legislative proposals for a referendum in Puerto Rico on the future political status of

the Island. It makes clear the Administration's intention to make hunger a weapon in that political decision.

S. 712, currently being considered by the other body, would afford the people of Puerto Rico an opportunity to choose among three status options: to remain associated to the United States through either enhanced Commonwealth or statehood, or to sever all ties to the U.S. through independence. In order for this choice to rest with the people of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Congress has to present three balanced options. If the options are unbalanced, it is the Congress who makes the choice, not the people.

Unfortunately, the Senate bill, in its current form, is severely unbalanced. In the case of Food Stamp and other benefit programs the bill offers an immediate increase in benefits the first year of statehood but no improvement if the people elect to enhance Commonwealth status.

The applicability of federal social programs to Puerto Rico is an issue of basic justice for U.S. citizens. It is not an issue of political status and every Commonwealth Governor, whether pro-statehood or pro-Commonwealth, has supported restoring full participation. If the people of Puerto Rico are to truly exercise their right to self-

determination, they have to be presented with balanced alternatives.

Without full participation, the referendum cannot be fair or balanced. To those currently denied adequate nutrition, the lure of immediate and substantial increases in food benefits will distort the fundamental choices facing the voters. Hunger should not be used as a political weapon in an election among U.S. citizens. If full participation is to be restored--as I fervently believe it should be--it should be restored under Commonwealth or statehood. The Administration's recommendation to take a meat cleaver to the already inadequate benefits is nothing more than a transparent attempt to manipulate the referendum. It should be seen for what it is and rejected out of hand.

Mr. Chairman, in our lifetimes there has never been a greater opportunity for realization of peace and prosperity everywhere--for the expansion of social justice and political democracy. The United States has served as the example and inspiration for the entire world in this great movement. It is only proper that we become even more worthy of this emulation by eliminating inequitable treatment of our own people in an area so basic and fundamental as fighting hunger. Mr. Chairman, I am confident that under your leadership we can take this significant step towards

redressing inequity, meeting human needs and making possible meaningful self-determination for the people of Puerto Rico.

Thank you very much for your time and your attention and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

