Thank you everyone for joining us. My name is Dorothy Monza, I am the Senior Policy Associate for Nutrition at RESULTS, and I'll be moderating this session. Now I'll pass it over to our incredible panelists to introduce themselves—Nikey, over to you.

Hello, my name is Yvonne Montoya. I am a RESULTS Expert on Poverty, HUD Certified Housing Counselor, and Policy Advocate for Domestic Anti-Poverty issues for California and Kansas.

The focus of this plenary is centering lived experience in policy and advocacy. What does lived experience mean to you and your family? And why did you get involved in anti-hunger work?

Lived experience is just that. Knowing what it is like, first-hand, to be homeless, hungry, unable to make ends meet even though you're employed. It's about not having those services available which will allow you the opportunity to become financial independent. It's about knowing what it's like going to bed hungry day in and day out…not just for the night, or a couple of hours, but for days. It's about making the hard decision to use your last few dollars to put food on the table to feed your children or keep the heating and electric on.

I lost my event planning business at the height of the Great Recession while living in Los Angeles, California. Unable to find work, I quickly went through my savings and eventually found myself homeless. It was while I was homeless that I realized how broken the system is and I realized that the services I needed to get me out of my situation were not available. When I finally was able to get out of my situation, I realized there needed to be policies in place to address the most basic of needs – accessibility to quality food. As a public policy major at Santa Monica College, I wrote a policy brief on the issue of food insecurity on college campuses. Thanks to the media, the issue of food insecurity on college campuses became front and center. In February 2016, Assemblywoman Shirley Webber introduced legislation requiring that all California college and universities accept SNAP/EBT at campus eateries as a condition to participating in the Pell Grant Program. In September 2016, Gov. Brown signed AB1747 into law and in 2017, Loyola Marymount University in Westchester, California, became the first university to accept SNAP/EBT at campus eateries.

It was a huge win, but there is still more to accomplish and I continue addressing the issues of food insecurity, hunger, child nutrition, and domestic anti-poverty issues in the states of California and Kansas, fighting for the right policies to be enacted to eliminate poverty.

Many of us in this virtual room are dedicated to fighting hunger. But are we *really* fighting hunger if individuals and families are left hungry when their benefits run out or are cut off? What do policymakers need to know from people with lived experience?

Policymakers at all levels – not just government – need to include those with lived experiences in on the discussions when creating policies to address poverty. We know what policies need to be implemented to allow those living in poverty the opportunity to become financially independent. We need social safety net programs, but we also need to stop having these programs be the end-all-be-all. These programs work in silos, when they all should be working in tandem. Poverty needs to be addressed from a holistic approach and needs to be all-encompassing. Being hungry isn't just about addressing hunger. It's about addressing underemployment, unemployment, living wage opportunities, child nutrition, and healthy eating. The accessibility to quality food at an affordable price. It's about making affordable housing available by having cities set aside housing inventory for first-time homebuyers at prices they can afford. It's about quality K-12 education and generational asset building. All these issues need to be addressed together when creating policies addressing poverty and those living in poverty – and those living in poverty need to be at the table, and their voices heard throughout the decision making process of policies addressing poverty.

One aspect of anti-poverty policy that does not support people living in poverty is the "cliff effect." The cliff effect occurs when a pay raise at work triggers a disproportionate loss of government assistance. How have you been affected by the cliff effect?

Once I became homeless, I came to realize how broken the system is – especially when it comes to the criteria used to determine a person's eligibility for social safety net programs and how the slightest increase in income can cause a person to lose all their public assistance benefits.

One of today's most politically debated challenges is addressing poverty. However, instead of debating the issue of what to do with people living in poverty, the focus needs to be on addressing the cliff effect, which is the leading factor in creating and keeping people in poverty and reliant on federal and state social safety net programs. (CirclesUSA, 2018).

In 2011, House Representatives met to discuss the findings of a study outlining what it would take to eliminate poverty. The study found that setting the poverty level at 200% would allow states to wean people off social safety net programs incrementally, while allowing them to move up the pay scale ladder to become economically independent and off social safety net programs permanently.

Unfortunately, Representatives went back their states, armed with this knowledge, and set the poverty level at 185%, making it impossible for people to become financially independent and off social safety net programs because of a catch-22 known as the "cliff effect."

What is the cliff effect? The cliff effect occurs when working individuals receiving assistance from federal and state funded social safety net programs lose their benefits faster than they are able to earn the income necessary to replace those lost benefits due to even the slightest increase in wages.

The Issue (Using my home state of California)

Employment rates indicate how many Californians are able to earn income through work, but do not reveal whether the income that workers earn is enough to support their families. The official poverty measure and the Supplemental Poverty Measure (or the related California Poverty Measure) estimate how many Californians lack adequate financial resources, but do not directly identify the cost of meeting basic needs; nor do they show how family budget components affect different types of households.

Analysis conducted by the California Budget and Policy Center (CBPC) found that the average single-parent family household in California needs to earn $65,865 in order to make ends meet. Of that $65,865, a monthly budget of $5,488 will go towards meeting the basic needs of housing and utilities, food, childcare, health care, transportation, miscellaneous, and taxes – with 28.6% going towards housing and utilities and 23.7% going towards childcare. (Kimberlin & Rose, 2017).

Forty-five percent (4,039,368) of California's families (with their own children under 18) "are living below the federal poverty threshold." (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2015). Of those children under 18 living in poverty, 46% (1,869,232) live in single-parent family households. Without social safety net programs, the child poverty rate would be much higher.

Each year, social safety net programs lift 4.9 million Californians above the federal poverty level. Of that number, 1.4 million of California's children are lifted above the federal poverty level, reducing the child poverty rate from 37.3 percent to 22.0 percent; with CalFresh and the federal and state EITC playing major roles. (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018).

(Slide 1) To demonstrate the importance of social safety programs and the impact these programs have, we'll look at Cindy's income with an without benefits. I need to mention that Cindy is a real person, these are not hypothetical numbers, this is how social safety net programs impact Cindy's family budget.

The harsh reality of these work-supported programs is that single-parent family households find themselves worse off as they begin to climb the economic ladder and their incomes increase. As they make their way up the economic ladder from $8 to $32, they hit significant drops in monthly resources. These drops, known as "cliffs", are the result of a decrease or loss in social safety net resources that are greater than the increase in income that created the drop.

(Slide 2) Let's take a look at Cindy's budget again. Notice the loss of programs once Cindy's income goes up. This slide demonstrates a realistic look at how the slightest increase in income creates a "cliff effect" resulting in the loss of benefits. The means do not justify the ends, leaving recipients to say to employers, "Sorry, I can't afford that raise."

There are major contradictory findings found on the federal level in determining eligibility for social safety net programs: Poverty Thresholds and Poverty Guidelines.

The Poverty Thresholds are the original version of the federal poverty measure, which the Census Bureau updates yearly. The thresholds are mainly for the purpose of calculating the number of people in poverty. It is loosely referred to as the "federal poverty level" (FPL). The Department of Health and Human Services warns that the term "FPL" is ambiguous and should be avoided, especially in situations where precision is important.

Poverty Guidelines are issued by the Department of Health and Human Services to determine eligibility to receive government-assisted programs. (ASPE, n.d.a).

Because there are two different criteria used to determine eligibility to receive federal assistance, many Californians who otherwise would be eligible for assistance, are ineligible from even the most basic social safety net programs, such as CalFresh, California's version of the federally funded SNAP program.

A report published by the United Way of California uncovered findings proving the "official poverty measure" greatly downplays poverty. (Block, et.al., 2018). The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) - established 45 years ago - has two major flaws: it uses the cost of food as the primary basis for the formula, when in the decades since the FPL was established, the costs of "housing, transportation, child care, health care, and other family necessities have risen far more rapidly than food costs." (Block, et.al.) Second, it fails to consider the local variants in cost of living, where the majority of Californians live in high-cost areas. (Block, et.al).

All the sources agree that the Census Bureau's FPL has created a larger population of families left behind, and larger and disproportionate populations of the "hidden poor" based on the outdated methods used to calculate the federal poverty level.

The overall commonalities found are that all researchers agree that a local real cost measure is necessary to address the issues of the cliff effect and California's working poor.

Replacing the FPL by implementing the Real Cost Measure is necessary to address the issues of the cliff effect and California's working poor.

In addition, utilizing data from the U.S. Department to Health and Human Services on recipients of public benefits - which are more accurate than Census data – will allow Californians participating in federal assistance programs the flexibility needed to become economically independent.

Finally, updating eligibility criteria, while gradually weaning recipients off work-supported resources, while increasing support, will allow recipients of social safety net programs the opportunity to not only plan for these decreases in assistance, but also allow them to acquire assets, which will create a path to economic independence.

MY CALL TO ACTION IS THIS:

To effectively address and eliminate poverty, we need to increase legislative knowledge regarding the cliff effect; emphasize replacing the Federal Poverty Level by implementing the [California] Real Cost Measure; and utilize data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on recipients of public benefits - which are more accurate than Census data currently used to determine the FPL. These recommendations will allow those who participate in federal assistance programs the flexibility needed to become financially and economically independent.

I am asking you to reach out to your elected officials and educate them on the need to make these changes and allow those on assistance programs the opportunity to become financially self-sufficient by addressing the cliff effect and decrease benefits incrementally rather stopping benefits at the slightest increase in income.

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