



RECOMMENDATIONS TO USDA FOR THE 2009 CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS REAUTHORIZATION

My name is Celia Hagert. I am a senior policy analyst for the Center for Public Policy Priorities. Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments today on the reauthorization of the child nutrition programs in 2009. For more than 20 years, the Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPPP) has been a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization committed to improving public policies and private practices to better the economic and social conditions of low- and moderate-income Texans.

We believe the upcoming reauthorization of the child nutrition programs and WIC should provide the opportunity to improve access, meal quality and nutrition in the school breakfast and lunch, summer nutrition, afterschool and child and adult care food programs, and in WIC. These programs are profoundly important to the millions of low-income children and communities struggling to combat childhood hunger and improve children's health in Texas and across the Southwest.

Regional Context

Hunger is a persistent and serious problem in the Southwest Region. Our states have some of the highest levels of hunger and food insecurity in the country. The states of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas all have food insecurity and hunger rates that are higher than the national average: New Mexico has the second-highest level of food insecurity in the country and ranks third in the percentage of families with very low food insecurity; Texas ranks third in the percentage of food insecure families and fifth in the percentage of families with very low food insecurity; and Arkansas has the third-highest share of families with very low food insecurity.

In addition, our states have some of the highest levels of poverty in the country. All five states have poverty rates higher than the national average, with Louisiana and New Mexico ranking second and third in the nation, respectively, in the percentage of persons living in poverty. Our states also rank high in terms of child poverty: all five states have child poverty rates above the national average; Louisiana and New Mexico rank third and fourth, respectively, in the percentage of poor children.

Rising food and gas prices are exacerbating these problems, forcing more and more working families into poverty and increasing the number of children who must rely on the nutrition safety net to meet their food needs. Schools and community-based organizations are under serious strain as well, relying more heavily on the child nutrition programs to provide services to their vulnerable clients.

I think it's safe to say that the child nutrition programs are potentially more important to this region than anywhere in the country.

While we don't expect the child nutrition programs to eradicate poverty, they play a critical role in preventing or mitigating the serious harm to children that comes from poverty by preventing hunger, improving health, and supporting local communities in their efforts to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children when they are not in their parents' care.

The child nutrition programs undoubtedly serve as the most comprehensive tool that states in the Southwest Region have to combat the problems of hunger and poor nutritional health among our child populations. These programs provide a hunger-prevention safety net for the millions of poor families and children in our region who face a daily battle to make ends meet and put food on the table.

We applaud the work that USDA has done over the last 5 years to strengthen and improve these programs, and we are excited about the opportunities that reauthorization provides. A well-conceived and adequately financed reauthorization bill, focused on the right program improvements, can do much to reduce hunger and food insecurity, address the problem of childhood overweight and obesity, improve child nutrition and health, and enhance child development and school readiness. These opportunities exist because the child nutrition programs and WIC are fundamentally sound investments that already do much to accomplish these goals. We should expand and improve these programs because we know from our work with the programs that they can do much more.

The Center for Public Policy Priorities is working with anti-hunger organizations and other groups across the Southwest region to develop recommendations and achieve consensus on what we believe to be the most important priorities for reauthorization. We will submit these recommendations in joint comments to USDA before the October 15 deadline. In the meantime, I would like to highlight our priorities for reauthorization here today. The following recommendations, if adopted, would qualitatively improve the programs, help them better achieve those goals, and give an important boost to children in Texas, the Southwest region, and to all of America's children.

Recommendations

Improving Access and Participation

Working families need access to nutritious food for their children in safe and nurturing environments in early childhood settings, after school and during the summer. Through the summer nutrition, school meals and child and adult care food programs, local programs and sponsors offer meals and snacks combined with supportive child care, enriching early education, recreation and physical activity, and educational out-of-school time activities.

Often it is the food that brings hungry school-aged children to the door of the out-of-school time programs in the first place, boosting the numbers in these safe and supportive environments. As to preschoolers, the child and adult care food program provides essential nutrition and quality monitoring for them in a wide variety of child care and Pre-K settings.

These nutrition programs provide important resources to feed children, but there are a number of ways to improve them so they better meet the needs of the children they were designed to serve. For example, it would serve both the goal of reducing food insecurity and the goal of promoting healthy eating if Congress and USDA were to:

- reduce the current 50 percent area eligibility threshold in order to serve more children in need of these programs, which now leave many low-income families without access;
- dramatically revise or eliminate the burdensome CACFP means test for children in family child care homes and thereby open up access for low-income working families;
- fund aggressive outreach efforts to allow more eligible children to participate;

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- develop strategies to help struggling community-based nutrition providers cope with the surges in food and energy prices;
 - make available suppers for school-aged children in afterschool programs in low-income areas in the same way that snacks now are available, in order to provide food and supervision as more parents work and commute long hours and programs run into the late afternoon and evening; and
 - make available suppers as a third meal for preschool children in child care for more than eight hours (currently, CACFP will not provide reimbursement for three meals – only up to two meals and a snack).

Supporting healthy eating habits that help to prevent childhood obesity and other nutrition-related diseases

Child nutrition programs can better support healthy eating habits which help to prevent childhood obesity and other nutrition-related diseases. The child nutrition programs present opportunities for healthy and nutritious meals from birth through the teen years and for modeling lifelong eating habits.

The State of Texas has done a remarkable job over the last few years strengthening nutrition standards in the schools. Combined with a renewed emphasis on physical activity in school, these efforts are starting to pay off.

Increasing the availability and consumption of fruits and vegetables and whole grains, and moving to lower fat dairy products will be key to strengthen these efforts and the role of the child nutrition programs in improving children's nutritional health. Promoting healthier eating, preventing obesity and improving child (and adult) health through these programs can be achieved in a number of ways, including:

- enhancing child nutrition program reimbursements to support all school and community-based providers, including summer, afterschool and child care providers and sponsors in their efforts to provide healthy meals and snacks. Our schools and community organizations are struggling right now to serve nutritional food to the growing number of children in need, given the inadequacy of the current reimbursement rates and the impact of rising food costs. If Congress is serious about using these programs to fight obesity and improve health, then they must appropriate significant new resources to increase reimbursement rates. All of the other recommendations we have related to improving meal quality are dependent on higher reimbursement rates;
- improving meal quality by updating the child care and school nutrition meal patterns and the WIC food package at regular intervals to insure that they stay current with nutrition science and best practice;
- establishing rules for all foods sold in schools to assure that they contribute to the health and well-being of children; and
- improving participation rates in all of the programs in order to draw children into the healthier eating environments they provide.

Expanding the School Breakfast Program

Good school nutrition is essential to healthy, to school improvement and to students' educational success. Numerous studies show hunger's detrimental effect on a child's ability to learn and thrive in school. Correspondingly, a huge range of studies find that WIC children enter school ready to learn and show better cognitive performance; and that school breakfast improves classroom behavior, test scores, grades and school attendance.

Texas has made great strides in expanding school breakfast participation. With support from Congress and USDA we can build on these efforts and do even better.

We can meet more of the nation's education goals and do so more rapidly and cost-effectively if we insure that many more children benefit from key nutrition supports through:

- expansion of breakfast-for-all programs, especially in lower-income communities, where all children can receive a school breakfast in the cafeteria or in the classroom at no charge;
- start-up grants for school districts to cover initial, one-time equipment costs for breakfast programs; and
- making sure that school lunch and breakfast are as healthy as possible, served at reasonable times and with enough time for children to eat.

Reducing Administrative Barriers

Less red tape and better co-ordination will let more hungry and needy children have access to the programs which provide them with the nutritious food they need. Unnecessary paperwork and administrative requirements and cost barriers for the working poor often keep potential afterschool, summer and child care providers and sponsors, schools and families from participating fully in the programs. The programs should be made administratively easier for sponsors to operate and for parents to access. Some important recommendations include:

- improving direct certification for school meals through state data matching systems;
- expanding pilot programs that eliminate or reduce paper applications and rely more on electronic applications and on alternative means (e.g., use of neighborhood or district-wide census data) to determine reimbursement for schools and other providers;
- streamlining program operations, increasing flexibility, and maximizing technology and innovation to allow sponsoring organizations and providers to operate most effectively;
- restoring advance funds for sponsors and child care centers to cover program costs upfront; and
- easing the administrative burdens on organizations that operate multiple child nutrition programs.

Conclusion

In 1946, Congress passed the National School Lunch Act as a "measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities." Since then Congress has wisely improved the child nutrition programs – initiating and strengthening WIC, school breakfast, summer food, child care food and afterschool nutrition – to better serve children and families and adjust to changes in our economy, our families, our workplaces, our schools and our communities. The goals of the 2009 reauthorization of the child nutrition programs should equally be to become current with economic, health and educational needs and to safeguard and improve our children's health and well-being and thereby strengthen the nation.

We appreciate USDA's commitment to these programs and its work in holding these listening sessions, as well as soliciting public comments. We look forward to working in partnership with USDA and our local and state partners to make these recommendations a reality.

Thank you.