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USDA's Food and Nutrition Service

RECOMMENDATIONS TO USDA FOR ENDING HUNGER BY 2015 AND REDUCING CHILD OBESITY

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 Administration's goal of reducing child obesity and ending child hunger by 2015, and for USDA's leadership in carrying out this critically important mission. We look forward to working with Secretary Vilsack and Under Secretary Concannon to expand the reach of the federal food programs and to ensure their effectiveness in preventing hunger and improving children's nutritional health in Texas.

The Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPPP) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit policy institute committed to improving public policies to better the economic and social conditions of low- and moderate-income Texans. For more than twenty years, CPPPP has helped to advance policies that reduce hunger and improve the nutritional health of Texans.

- **Efforts to end hunger must be accompanied by broader measures to reduce the fundamental cause of hunger – poverty.**
- **The prevention of both obesity and food insecurity requires regular access to affordable and nutritious food.**
- **The fastest and most direct way to reduce hunger is to improve and expand the federal nutrition programs so people at risk of hunger have the resources they need to afford an adequate diet.**

Summary of Recommendations

- Restore economic growth and create more jobs at family-supporting wages.
- Strengthen income supports for low-income families, such as affordable health insurance options, refundable tax credits, child care and housing subsidies.
- Greatly strengthen the SNAP and child nutrition programs—both access to benefits and the quality of nutrition provided.
- Ensure all families have convenient access to reasonably priced, healthy food in their communities.

Restore Economic Growth and Strengthen Income Supports

The fastest and most direct way to reduce hunger is to improve and expand the federal nutrition programs so people at risk of hunger have the resources they need to afford an adequate diet. But to reach the more ambitious goal of ending child hunger by 2015, our efforts must be accompanied by broader measures to reduce the fundamental cause of hunger – poverty.

We know that the best way to reduce negative child outcomes – including those related to hunger – is to strengthen our nation's most vulnerable families and, in particular, to increase their ability to provide real economic security for their children.

- **Because they are often the flip sides of one coin, hunger and obesity offer the opportunity for co-existing solutions.**
- **A stronger nutrition safety net with a more comprehensive nutrition education component would reduce obesity by giving families the resources they need to make better food choices.**
- **A national movement is needed that calls on everyone—from the president to the average citizen – to act to end widespread hunger.**

Unfortunately, low-income families consistently experience economic insecurity in Texas and across the nation. In Texas, over three-and-a-half million people live below the poverty line. Texas ranks last among the states in the share of the population without health insurance, almost one-quarter of our children are impoverished, and we have among the lowest rates of educational attainment in the nation. Nearly two-of-three Texas low-income working families lack a parent with any postsecondary education, ranking us 48th in the nation.

These hardships occur despite work. Among low-income Texas families (with earnings below twice the poverty level), 86 percent have at least one parent who works either part- or full-time. Despite work and earnings that approach middle-income status, many low-income Texas families with children still struggle to afford housing, food, child care, health care, transportation, and other basic needs. Over half (56 percent) of these families spend at least 30 percent of their income on housing and have at least one parent without health insurance.

When low-income families have to spend inordinate amounts of their limited incomes on health care, housing or child care, they have even less money to spend on food. As a result, most poor families also are food insecure or hungry.

If the United States is to end hunger and ensure that all Americans are able to afford the food they need, we must also address these disparities in health insurance, child care and housing.

America cannot move forward while leaving so many families behind. We must ensure that economic opportunity is available for all workers, so they can get first get *good* jobs, with earnings that allow them to provide for their families' basic needs, and then get *better* jobs that allow them to advance economically and build the middle class. In order to accomplish these goals, the U.S. government must ensure a strong economy, improve our education system, expand employment opportunities, and raise the minimum wage – which despite recent increases is still 17 percent lower today in purchasing power than it was in the peak value year of 1968.

Greatly Strengthen the SNAP and Child Nutrition programs

SNAP Recommendations

- Base monthly SNAP benefits on a realistic measure of what poor households need to buy food for an adequate diet. SNAP is specifically designed to help people bridge the gap between their earnings and expenses. However, even with benefit increases in the 2007 Farm Bill, low-income families continue to struggle to stretch their SNAP benefits to afford a nutritious diet.
- Extend food stamp eligibility to more struggling low-income people. Congress should eliminate the ban on SNAP benefits for drug felons, eliminate the restrictions on ABAWD participation, and expand eligibility to cover to all lawfully present immigrants.

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- Enforce federal timeliness standards. Texas has consistently and egregiously violated federal timeliness standards for four years. As a result, needy families who qualify for SNAP are struggling to feed their families. Further, food charities like food pantries and soup kitchens, whose resources are already strained due to the poor economy, are struggling to fill the gaps while needy families wait for their application to be approved. This situation won't change without serious pressure from the federal government. USDA needs to be part of the solution to this problem by consistently and vigorously enforcing federal law related to timeliness.
 - Continue to support states' efforts to improve access to SNAP by simplifying program rules and reforming Quality Control.
 - Ban the practice of finger imaging as a condition of eligibility.

Child Nutrition Program Recommendations

Improve Access and Participation

- 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.
- Fund aggressive outreach efforts to allow more eligible children to participate.
- 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.
- 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).

Expand the School Breakfast Program

- Expand 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.
- Fund start-up grants for school districts to cover initial, one-time equipment costs for breakfast programs; and
- Make sure that school lunch and breakfast are as healthy as possible, served at reasonable times and with enough time for children to eat.

Reduce Administrative Barriers

- Improve direct certification for school meals through state data matching systems.
- Expand 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.
- Streamline program operations, increasing flexibility, and maximizing technology and innovation to allow sponsoring organizations and providers to operate most effectively.
- Ease the administrative burdens on organizations that operate multiple child nutrition programs.

Use the Child Nutrition Programs to Support Healthy Eating and Prevent Child Obesity

The federal nutrition programs offer a solution both to obesity and food insecurity in the United States. A stronger nutrition safety net with a more comprehensive nutrition education component would reduce both hunger and obesity by giving families the resources they need to make better food choices.

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.

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:

- Enhance 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 and the Administration are 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.
- Improve 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.
- Establish rules for all foods sold in schools to assure that they contribute to the health and well-being of children.

Ensure All Families Have Convenient Access to Reasonably Priced, Healthy Food in Their Communities.

Many people who live in low-income neighborhoods do not have access to grocery stores that sell a variety of fresh produce. These neighborhoods are often called "food deserts" – poor neighborhoods where residents lack cars to drive to distant supermarkets, prompting many to rely on nearby fast-food or convenience-store fare. What was once a more common problem in rural communities has spread to urban areas as well, the result of limited public transit systems and high energy prices combined with supermarkets loath to set up shop in less profitable areas.

Small corner stores in low-income neighborhoods usually cannot afford the refrigeration units and other related expenses to stock an adequate variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. Instead, they typically carry foods that have a longer shelf life, such as junk food. Without healthy food options, these families are eating readily available junk food on a regular basis. Without access to fresh fruits and vegetables, low-income families are less likely to be able to maintain healthy weights and have increased chances of developing a diet-related disease. Seniors, in particular, struggle to access and afford fresh produce and are often forced to choose between food and medicine.

A growing body of research on the segregation of neighborhoods by income, race, and ethnicity cites accessibility to healthy—and unhealthy—food as a factor in the health disparities between “have” and “have not” communities. In a recent analysis in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine (January 2009) of 54 studies on food access, researchers found that people who

live in poorer neighborhoods in the United States are less likely to have easy access to supermarkets carrying a wide variety of fresh produce and other healthy food.

These findings underscore the need for new policies and other local actions to address the problem of poor access to healthy foods in many lower income, rural, and minority communities. USDA should continue to explore and fund promising pilot programs that test innovative approaches to improve access to fresh produce in currently underserved communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we know what to do to reduce hunger, but these changes will not be achieved without a commitment from all Americans. We need a national movement that calls on everyone – from the president to the average citizen – to act to end widespread hunger. To reach the 2015 goal of ending child hunger, concerned citizens across the nation must join forces to help the president and Congress – as well as our state and local leaders – to take the actions necessary to carry out this mission.

As part of this effort, USDA should invest in public education to increase outreach and awareness of the importance of preventing hunger and improving nutrition for health, learning and productivity. Like the federal government, state and local governments need to do more to raise awareness of the public health problem of hunger and support local efforts to understand and respond to it. One way to raise awareness is to conduct a media campaign. Governments also can work with state and local anti-hunger and anti-poverty coalitions to gain a better understanding of hunger in local communities.

We appreciate USDA's leadership in carrying our President Obama's pledge to end child hunger by 2015. We thank you for holding these listening sessions and soliciting public input. We look forward to working in partnership with USDA and our local and state partners to make this vision a reality.