

Child Nutrition Forum Statement of Principles for Child Nutrition Reauthorization

Congress has a unique opportunity in the upcoming reauthorization of the child nutrition programs to improve access, meal quality and nutrition for millions of children, particularly low-income children in child care (the Child and Adult Care Food Program - CACFP), in school (breakfast and lunch programs), during out-of-school time (afterschool, on weekends and during the summer), and at home (the WIC Program). Thousands of diverse national, state and local organizations are committed to a reauthorization bill that has a bold vision to eliminate child hunger. These organizations are now joined by a President-elect who during the campaign has set the goal of ending child hunger by 2015. To that end, these organizations are committed to passage of a strong child nutrition reauthorization bill in 2009.

The extraordinarily successful, cost-effective child nutrition programs play a critical role in helping children, especially those in low-income families, achieve access to quality nutrition, child care, educational and enrichment activities while improving their overall health, development, and school achievement. In addition, the adult component of CACFP provides needed nutrition assistance to elderly and impaired adults. However, federal support for these programs has not always kept pace with children's need for these programs, food cost inflation, the costs of delivering services, or increased scientific knowledge.

A well-conceived, adequately funded reauthorization bill can reduce hunger and food insecurity in America, help reduce childhood overweight and obesity, improve child nutrition and health, and enhance child development and school readiness. To this end we call on the Administration and Congress to enact a reauthorization bill that:

- 1) assures and strengthens program access and supports participation by underserved children and communities;
- 2) enhances nutrition quality and provides adequate meal reimbursements; and
- 3) modernizes technology and simplifies program administration and operation.

A substantial investment of new funding must be included in the Federal budget to achieve these goals. Without new program investments, it will be impossible for Congress to build upon the successes of the 2004 reauthorization. With enhanced Federal support, priorities for the 2009 Child Nutrition reauthorization should include:

I. Improving access to nutritious foods in schools, child care centers and homes, in afterschool programs, on weekends, during the summer, and in the home.

School Meal Programs: Numerous studies document the positive effect school breakfast has on reducing hunger and improving nutrition, classroom behavior, test scores, grades, and school attendance. Through expansion of breakfast programs, including "universal" and in-classroom programs in all low-income areas, all children can receive breakfast at no charge to ensure that many more of them begin the day with the nutrition they need to succeed. Federal funding for

breakfast commodities, currently only available to the school lunch program, also would support efforts to provide nutritious breakfasts to more children.

In addition, under the current school meals fee structure, many students from working poor families cannot afford the reduced-price meal charge. Free meal eligibility should be expanded so that children from households with incomes up to 185 percent of the national poverty line can receive meals at no charge.

Child Care and Out-of-School Time Programs: Through CACFP, summer food and school meals programs, providers offer meals and snacks, combined with enriching recreational and educational out-of-school time activities, to preschoolers and to school-aged children after school and in the summer. CACFP provides essential nutrition and monitoring of care for young children in child care centers and family child care homes. Current area eligibility guidelines for family child care homes and afterschool and summer programs are inconsistent with other federal programs and leave many low-income families without access to the nutrition supports, especially in rural areas. Eligibility guidelines and the reimbursement structure need to be broadened to serve more children. In addition, supports should be made available nationwide through afterschool programs in low-income areas to provide food, supervision, and educational and enrichment activities as more parents work and commute long hours. Reauthorization should also include strategies and resources to provide more nutrition assistance for children vulnerable to hunger on weekends and when schools are not in session. As programs expand to address the needs of participants, appropriate training and technical assistance also will be necessary to ensure meal quality and effectiveness.

WIC provides low-income at-risk pregnant and postpartum mothers and young children with critical nutrition services, health and social service referrals, and culturally appropriate nutritious foods that contribute to their overall health and well-being. Assuring access for all eligible families contributes to healthy pregnancies, improved birth outcomes, positive impacts on the incidence of childhood overweight and obesity, improved readiness for school, and reduced health care costs. As a discretionary program, it is critical for Congress to support WIC's current eligibility rules and nutritional support so that infants and young children continue to experience the full complement of WIC's health benefits.

II. Enhancing the nutritional environment to promote healthy eating habits for women and children.

Child nutrition programs play a critical role in addressing one of our nation's most serious public health concerns -- childhood obesity and related health problems. As food costs rise, families, schools and child care, afterschool and summer food providers struggle to provide healthy meals for children.

National nutrition standards, consistent with the Dietary Guidelines, should be established for foods and beverages sold outside of the school meals programs. USDA should assist state and local school food service programs to work toward a consistent national interpretation of the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans while it completes the regulatory process for its new school meal standards. Improved nutritional health for our children can be achieved by

increasing meal reimbursements to help schools, sponsors and providers improve meals and snacks and increasing children's access to fruits and vegetables in all forms (including those sourced from regional farms), whole grains and low-fat milk and reduced-fat dairy products.

The success of the WIC program in improving child health and nutrition outcomes is well-documented. Retaining current WIC eligibility rules and nutrition support is critical to promoting that success. In addition, Congress has an opportunity to further contribute to WIC's success by preserving the scientific basis for the WIC food package and ensuring that the recommendations of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) are fully implemented. To that end, Congress should direct USDA to provide the full complement of foods recommended by the IOM for the new WIC food packages including yogurt and the full amount of fruit and vegetables the IOM determined was necessary for nutritionally sound WIC food packages. Moreover, Congress should refrain from dictating the addition of any foods, or increases in the amounts of foods, beyond the specific recommendations of the IOM.

Nutrition education funding for all child nutrition programs also will provide children at all stages of growth and development with the skills necessary to make lifelong healthy choices. Promoting and teaching healthy eating is essential to addressing childhood obesity and other diet-related health problems. Congress supported nutrition education and promotion by authorizing the creation of a USDA Team Nutrition Network in the 2004 Child Nutrition Reauthorization. Now, funds should be appropriated to carry out those provisions.

III. Modernizing and streamlining program operations to improve program integrity and efficiency.

Across all programs, steps should be taken to streamline program operations, allow more cross program certification, increase flexibility, and maximize the use of technology and innovation to reduce barriers to eligible families and children and to reduce the administrative burden for service providers.

Recent congressional efforts to ease the paperwork burdens in the Summer Food Service Program have begun to attract more sponsors and children to this underutilized program. Additional resources should be available in areas with access barriers (e.g. transportation problems). To improve the accuracy of the school meals programs without impeding program access or overly burdening school personnel, Congress should also strengthen and expand direct certification for school meals (enrollment based on data matching) and expand options that eliminate or reduce paper applications (electronic applications and alternative data collection systems, e.g., use of neighborhood or district-wide census data).

Growth in the WIC Program requires policy makers to expand their commitment to technology enhancements – management information systems that meet core function needs and are Electronic Benefit Transfer-ready -- making it easier for mothers and young children to access WIC foods, protect program integrity and achieve economies and efficiencies in the delivery of services.

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 improved the child nutrition and WIC programs to better serve children and families and adjust to changes in our families, workplaces, schools and communities. The upcoming child nutrition reauthorization provides an opportunity to build on this strong tradition and to ensure the continued health and well-being of our nation's most vulnerable population – our children.

To sign-on to the Child Nutrition Forum's Statement of Principles, click here:
http://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/5118/petition.jsp?petition_KEY=184