



U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Education and Labor

Written Testimony of:

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On behalf of:

**MISSION: READINESS
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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Kline, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing on H.R. 5504, the "Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act." I am honored to have the opportunity to speak today in support of this historic legislation.

My name is Paul Monroe and I am a retired Major General. I served this great nation for over 46 years in the United States Army and the California Army National Guard. Currently, I am the founder and principle of Monroe Executive Associates, which advises developing organizations on leadership and diversity.

I am testifying today on behalf of MISSION: READINESS, a national, non-profit organization of over 150 retired Admirals and Generals, who are dedicated to ensuring our nation's continued security and prosperity through smart investments in the upcoming generation of American children. We are concerned by recent data from the Department of Defense indicating that 75 percent of all young Americans aged 17 to 24 are unable to join the military primarily because they failed to finish high school, have criminal records, or are physically unfit. This disquieting reality threatens to diminish our military strength and put our national security interests at risk.

Military concerns about the fitness of our children are not new. In fact, the National School Lunch Act of 1946 was originally passed as a matter of national security. At that time, there were legitimate concerns that malnourishment would render American youth unfit to defend the nation. Today, it is obesity that threatens the overall health of America and the future strength of our military. It is imperative that we act now, as we did in 1946, to ensure that our children grow up fit to defend our nation, if need be.

Obesity is the leading medical reason young adults are not qualified to serve. Obesity rates among children and young adults have increased dramatically in recent decades. By now most of us have heard that in the past 30 years, child obesity rates have more than tripled. New data from the CDC paints an even starker portrait. In the last decade alone, between 1998 and 2008, the number of states reporting that 40 percent or more young adults were overweight or obese rose from one state to 39. To put this problem into perspective, today's young Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 would have to collectively lose 390 million pounds in order to be at a healthy weight.

As retired Generals and Admirals, my colleagues at MISSION: READINESS and I are deeply troubled by the negative effect that obesity is having on our ability to recruit qualified candidates for military service. At least 9 million young adults, or 27 percent of all young Americans ages 17 to 24, are too overweight to enlist. Since 1995, the proportion of candidates who failed their physical exams due to weight problems increased by a staggering 70 percent. This all-too-common disqualifier is limiting the pool of available recruits and eroding our military readiness. Make no mistake about it; the obesity epidemic poses a genuine threat to our national security.

Beyond its harmful impact on the overall number of youth who are able to qualify for military service, obesity also imposes a great fiscal burden on our nation. Every year, the military discharges over 1,200 first-term enlistees before their contracts are up because of weight problems; the military must then recruit and train their replacements at a cost of \$50,000 for each man or woman, thus spending more than \$60 million a year.

Turning the tide of obesity in this country is certainly not an easy task. We do not pretend there is one single action that we as a nation can take to remedy this problem. However, it is crystal clear that one pivotal step we must take is to improve the quality and nutritional value of food and beverages served in our schools.

The school setting is critical for shaping the lifelong eating and exercise habits of our youth. Research published in *Health Affairs* shows that as much as 40 percent of a child's daily caloric intake occurs at school. What children eat in school can either be part of the problem, or part of the solution.

Fortunately, this Committee is poised to consider legislation that effectively addresses the issue of nutrition in schools. H.R. 5504 the "Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act," includes provisions that will raise the quality of all foods and beverages served on school grounds. Specifically, it will require the Secretary of Agriculture to establish a new set of nutrition standards for foods and beverages served through the school breakfast and school lunch programs that are consistent with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The bill will also require the Secretary to establish similar science-based standards for all foods and beverages sold competitively. Further, H.R. 5504 will provide an additional 6 cent per meal reimbursement, on a performance basis, to help schools; make necessary equipment upgrades; train and hire staff; and purchase fresh fruits, vegetables, lean meats, whole-grains and low-fat dairy.

Current nutrition standards for the school lunch and school breakfast programs have been in place since 1995. We are long overdue for an update.

In addition to making improvements to nutrition standards and overall meal quality, H.R. 5504 also includes provisions to promote nutrition education. The bill will direct the Secretary to provide funds, equal to one half cent per reimbursable lunch served, to states for nutrition and wellness promotion. It will also instruct the Secretary to award competitive grants for the purpose of supporting community partnerships that are designed to promote wellness. Nutrition education is vital to maintaining a healthful environment for youth. In many cases, the habits that children form in their early years persist into adulthood. The journal *Health Affairs* reports that 80 percent of children who were overweight at ages 10-15 were obese at age 25. Properly managed, nutrition education programs can provide children and their families with the knowledge, skills, and motivation needed to make lifelong healthful choices.

Last, H.R. 5504 includes proposals that will help simplify enrollment and increase access to child nutrition programs. Increasing access to nutritious food is equally important as

improving the quality of school meals. While it may seem counterintuitive, it is well documented that hunger and food insecurity also contribute to obesity.

Many children who experience persistent hunger are also obese, because they more frequently have access to unhealthy foods or snacks instead of regular, nutritious meals. Recent research by Rachel Tolbert Kimbro of Rice University and Elizabeth Rigby of the University of Texas at Houston, published in *Health Affairs* has shown that subsidized meals can help low-income children maintain a healthy weight.

Increased access to school lunches and breakfasts can help remedy this problem by helping to ensure that children regularly get enough food to eat and the food they eat will be nutritious enough to help them develop healthy eating habits to avoid obesity.

The grim reality is that we live in a dangerous world. As long as outside threats to our national security exist, we are well served to maintain a high level of military readiness. **The Admirals and Generals of MISSION: READINESS are in strong support of H.R. 5504 and we respectfully request, in the interest of national security, that the distinguished members of this Committee work to move this important legislation toward enactment.** Doing so will help improve the health of our nation's children and, ultimately, strengthen national security.

Thank you.