

**Testimony of James D. Weill, President of the Food Research and Action Center,
before the U.S. House of Representatives, House Education and Labor Committee
on the Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act (H.R. 5504)**

July 1, 2010

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee.

We at the Food Research and Action Center are pleased to have been invited to testify today on key issues in Child Nutrition Reauthorization. The introduction of H.R. 5504, in particular, is a huge step toward getting a strong reauthorization this year, and having this hearing at this juncture will hopefully create strong momentum to move the process forward and finish it with the best possible outcome.

As the Committee knows, it is important to the nation's children – and to the nation's future – to move expeditiously to strengthen the child nutrition programs. Those programs, of course, already are very strong, with a range of positive outcomes – they are among the very best public investments in children that this nation has.

Study after study has shown that the programs not only reduce childhood hunger, but they improve health, early child development and school achievement.

- For low-income schoolchildren, the school lunch and breakfast programs reduce hunger and obesity, provide a substantial share of the key nutrients children need each day, reduce school nurse visits and improve attendance, student behavior, educational achievement, and test scores.
- The out-of-school time nutrition programs (summer food and afterschool food) draw hungry children into school-based and community-based programs that keep them safe and engaged, reduce obesity, and provide basic nutrients at key times when children can't get them from school meals programs. Food insecurity among families with children increases in the summer, as does children's weight gain. The summer food program helps avert these bad summer outcomes. Afterschool and summer food dollars help make out-of-school time programming sustainable.
- The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) pays for food for low-income children in Head Start, child care centers, and family child care. It improves preschoolers' nutrition, reduces obesity, strengthens the quality of care, and, in some states, is the only monitor of family child care for many children.

- Participation of women, infants and young children in the WIC program boosts rates of prenatal care, reduces low birthweight and infant mortality, reduces childhood anemia and obesity, and saves money in health systems.

It would take a few days rather than a few minutes to go through the research on this, so I will just point to the most recent example – a report last week in the Journal of Policy Analysis and Management by Dr. Peter Hinrichs finding that participation in the National School Lunch Program leads to a significant increase in educational attainment and opportunity.

The versatile strengths of the programs have led to their very wide support by the American public, as seen most recently in the poll by the Child Nutrition Initiative, which found that 83 percent of Americans support or strongly support expanding the Child Nutrition Act to cover more children and provide healthier food, and have led as well to broad bipartisan support among policymakers. Indeed, it is not an accident that both the House and the Senate bills introduced this year by the committee chairs have the support of the ranking member of the subcommittee (in the House) and of the committee (in the Senate). That is a testament to great personal leadership in both parties, but it is also a manifestation of the importance of the reach and positive impact of the programs.

This bipartisanship is a tradition in child nutrition. Indeed, in the last reauthorization then-Chairman Boehner and then-Ranking Member Miller teamed up to produce a bill that passed the House unanimously. In this reauthorization cycle, 341 members of the House recently voted in favor of an amendment expressing the sense of Congress supporting President Obama's \$10 billion over 10 years funding request for child nutrition reauthorization.

But the programs, as good as they are, need to be strengthened further. They have their shortcomings, and those problems need to be fixed both because America's children need stronger programs, and because the existing structural strengths give them the potential to do more with extraordinary payoff for the nation.

America's children need this first because there is far too much childhood hunger and food insecurity. Even before the recession 12.4 million children in the U.S. lived in food insecure households, according to the official federal data. In 2008, at the front end of the recession, that number rose to 16.7 million. The government hasn't released 2009 data yet, but the Food Research and Action Center's analysis of a large Gallup poll showed that in 2009, 24.1 percent of households with children reported that there have been times in the past twelve months when they did not have enough money to buy food that they or their family needed.

“Reading, Writing and Hungry,” a report written by FRAC and Children’s Health Watch for the Partnership for America’s Economic Success, points out that “[f]ood insecurity in early childhood can limit a child’s cognitive and socio-emotional development, ultimately impairing school achievement and thus long-term productivity and economic potential.” The report continues, that “[d]ata has shown that, by the third grade, children who had been food insecure in kindergarten saw a 13% drop in their reading and math test scores compared to their food-secure peers. Hungry children are also more likely than their non-hungry peers to suffer from hyperactivity, absenteeism, generally poor behavioral, and poor academic functioning.”

In Feeding America’s, “Child Food Insecurity in the United States: 2005 – 2007,” report author John Cook, Boston Medical Center and Boston University School of Medicine, states that “[c]hild hunger is robbing us of the best of America’s imagination and ingenuity.” He continues, “[t]he impact of child hunger is more far reaching than one might anticipate. Child food insecurity creates billions of dollars in costs to our society. Child hunger affects a child’s health, education and job readiness.”

At the same time that the nation has a serious, persistent and growing child hunger problem, the nation also has a serious, persistent and growing childhood obesity problem. Childhood obesity has more than tripled in the past 30 years. About a quarter of 2-5 year olds and one-third of school-age children (including adolescents) are overweight or obese. Childhood obesity has both immediate and long-term health impacts, including increased risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as high cholesterol or high blood pressure, and greater risk for bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, and social and psychological problems such as stigmatization and poor self-esteem.

A strong reauthorization will reduce childhood hunger and reduce childhood obesity. To do that, it is important that Congress both reach many more children with the benefits of these programs, and make the nutrition provided through the programs healthier. We strongly support provisions that will reach both of these goals.

Given the short amount of time I have, I will focus today on the access/participation side of the equation. But at the outset I would point out that getting more children enrolled in the programs independently contributes to healthier eating – greater access means less obesity.

- Just this past March, an analysis published in the journal Health Affairs reported that, for young children, “subsidized meals at school or day care are beneficial for children’s weight status, and we argue [in this paper] that expanding access

to subsidized meals may be the most effective tool to use in combating obesity in poor children.” *

- The White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity final report, unveiled by the First Lady in May, pointed out that to “[i]ncrease participation rates in USDA nutrition assistance programs” is itself a key aspect of reducing childhood obesity. To support the success of this recommendation, the Task Force proposed that action be taken to “ensure ready access to nutrition assistance program benefits, especially for children.”
- The Institute of Medicine’s report, *Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity*, recommendations also included a strategy to “[i]ncrease participation in federal, state, and local government nutrition assistance programs (e.g., WIC, School Breakfast and Lunch Programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Afterschool Snacks Program, the Summer Food Service Program, SNAP).”
- A FRAC analysis issued earlier this year which reviewed “How Improving Federal Nutrition Program Access and Quality Work Together to Reduce Hunger and Promote Healthy Eating”^{**} summarized the ways in which increasing participation in school breakfast and lunch, WIC, the Child and Adult Care Food Program and afterschool and summer food can help reduce obesity.

Given these strengths, it is crucial to boost participation. For every 100 low-income children eating school lunch each day, only 47 eat school breakfast. For every 100 low-income children eating school lunch each day during the regular school year, only 16 get to have a summer lunch on a typical summer day. This past Tuesday FRAC released a new report focusing on the struggles of summer nutrition programs and showing that, scandalously, the nation has been losing ground during the recession in feeding children in the summer. When summer food participation needed to be rising, there instead was a dip of 2.5 percent – or 73,000 low-income children – from July 2008 to July 2009.

So, what are the key ways to increase participation?

Many of them are embodied in H.R. 5504:

- Lowering the area eligibility test for Summer Food to 40 percent in rural areas. The current 50 percent threshold is higher than it was in the programs’ earlier

* Rachel Kimbro and Elizabeth Rigby, “Federal Food Policy and Childhood Obesity: A Solution or Part of the Problem?” *Health Affairs* 29(3), 411-418.

** Food Research and Action Center Issue Briefs for Child Nutrition Reauthorization, Number 1, February 2010, available at http://frac.org/pdf/CNR01_qualityandaccess.pdf

stages and keeps many communities with significant numbers of low-income children from qualifying.

- Creating a year-round program allowing community-based sponsors to serve summer food and afterschool food during the school year through a unitary program with a single set of paperwork. The provision will significantly reduce administrative work and red tape, causing more community organizations to run the program, which will increase the number of low-income children who receive nutritious meals and snacks after school, on weekends, on school holidays, and during the summer.
- Allowing schools in high-poverty areas to offer free meals to all students without collecting paper applications. This will increase the number of low-income children who receive the benefits of participating in the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs, and it will significantly reduce administrative work for the schools.
- Improving direct certification from SNAP to school meals and authorizing direct certification from Medicaid. This will allow many more eligible children to receive free meals and bypass the paper application process, making the process easier for both families and schools.
- Providing competitive grant funds to promote the expansion of the School Breakfast Program. Less than half of the low-income students who eat school lunch every day eat school breakfast. The grants will increase school breakfast participation, which boosts academic performance and reduces absenteeism, nurse visits, discipline problems, and obesity.
- Expanding the afterschool meal program so that schools can provide meals after school, on weekends, and school holidays through the National School Lunch Program. The program is needed to ensure that low-income children can access adequate, nutritious food at their afterschool programs which run into the late afternoon and evening in order to provide care while their parents work and commute long hours and hold non-traditional jobs.
- Requiring school food authorities to coordinate with Summer Food sponsors on developing and distributing Summer Food outreach materials. This provision will help increase summer food outreach so that more children participate.
- Adding the option of serving an additional meal or snack to children who are in child care for more than eight hours/day. This will ensure that young children who are spending more of their waking hours in child care on work days as

parents work longer hours to make ends meet will receive the full complement of meals they need while in care.

- Strengthening policies to prevent overt identification of low-income children in school meal programs. This will help ensure that stigma/embarrassment does not keep low-income children from receiving the nutritious school meals that their bodies need.
- Reducing paperwork and simplifying program requirements in CACFP. By reducing red tape in CACFP, more low-income children will have access to the nutritious meals and snacks they need while they are in child care.
- Allowing state WIC agencies the option to certify children for up to one year. This will increase access for children and reduce paperwork for families and WIC administrators.

In addition to the access provisions, there are a number of key nutrition provisions that will improve the health and well-being of children, including:

- Granting the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to establish national nutrition standards for all foods sold on the school campus throughout the extended school day, including the time before and after school.
- Adding a performance-based increase in the federal reimbursement rate for school lunches (six cents per meal) to help schools meet new meal standards for healthier school meals.
- Strengthening Local School Wellness Policies by providing the Secretary authority to oversee local wellness policies to promote improved implementation and transparency, and requiring opportunities for public input.
- Revising the nutrition standards for meals, snacks and beverages served through CACFP to make them consistent with the most recent U.S. Dietary Guidelines.
- Providing education and encouragement to participating child care centers and homes to provide children with healthy meals and snacks and daily opportunities for physical activity, and to limit screen time.
- Increasing USDA training, technical assistance and educational materials available to child care providers, helping them to serve healthier food.

These are all excellent steps forward. As the Committee knows, because of budget constraints, some of these provisions are authorized in the bill only for some states. We

will be seeking, as the process goes forward, to get broader coverage for these key provisions – to reach more states and in some instances, like the summer food provision, which only applies to rural areas, to broaden it out to suburban and urban areas. And one particular priority for us as the bill moves forward is expanding the Afterschool Meal Program to all states. The program is currently available in only 13 states and the District of Columbia. The program helps ensure that children whose parents are working long or non-traditional hours and are struggling with low wages can be sure that their children have access to healthy nutritious meals, and it helps support high quality educational and enrichment programs after school, on the weekends, and during school holidays.

Moving forward on a reauthorization bill that provides critical support for low-income children can't wait. We urge you, Mr. Chairman and Committee members, to mark up and report out H.R. 5504, and to include the additional program improvements mentioned earlier – and the funding necessary – to strengthen the child nutrition and WIC programs. This will ensure significant movement towards the goals we all have of ending child hunger and dramatically reducing childhood obesity.