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House Education and Labor Committee Hearing: *The Rising Cost of Food and Its Impact on Federal Child Nutrition Programs*

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Good morning, Mr./Madame Chairperson and Members of the Committee.

I am Jim Harnett, the President of Family and Children's Association, a social service agency serving vulnerable and needy families and children in Nassau County, New York. Family and Children's is a leading human service agency on Long Island helping over 20,000 of our neighbors each year. We work to protect and strengthen Long Island's most vulnerable individuals especially children, seniors and families.

The Agency serves people who often have no where else to turn; particularly those who struggle with social, emotional and/or economic challenges and lack adequate support systems. In addition to our **Afterschool and Summer Nutrition Programs** we offer 40 programs including the only shelter for runaway teens in Nassau County, provide the PINS (Person in Need of Supervision) Diversion Service for the County, family-focused programs to help parents and their children avoid foster care or court-appointed supervision; high school equivalency diploma & school enrichment programs to help young people succeed; outreach and in-home service to senior citizens to protect our most vulnerable neighbors; and many, many more programs. Our various counseling and referral services not only strengthen our clients, they often save families and individuals who are on the brink of disaster. We operate a countywide program to assist children with mental illness to remain with their families, two outpatient mental health clinics and two chemical dependency programs and four transitional and mental health residential programs.

Our Summer Camp is an extension of our Promise Project. The Promise Project offers afterschool services to 6th, 7th and 8th graders from a middle school in the Hempstead School District. The Promise Scholars meet each school day to receive homework assistance, attend workshops and participate in activities geared towards promoting positive youth development, academic performance, and community connections. The project will work with these children until they complete high school. Upon graduation, each student will be awarded a \$2,500 scholarship to the college or vocational school of his or her choice.

The program began October, 2007 and the group's first community service project was an inter-generational holiday party with the senior residents of the Greenwich Street Apartments. The Promise Scholars helped serve food to the seniors who attended the holiday event and delivered dinners to the homebound who could not join in the celebration.

Community volunteers and students from local colleges and universities have shared their skills and talents with the program. The children have received instruction in culinary arts, step dancing and physical education. There is a group for young men and a Girls Empowerment group. Plans for the upcoming year include a science club, additional instruction in the performing and visual arts and the Positive Action™ character education program. The Promise Project is staffed with professional staff and six youth counselors who are students at Hempstead High School.

The Summer Camp will use the Olympics as a theme, not only for its obvious athletic activities, but as an opportunity for the children to learn as much as possible about China's people, culture, language, history, and current events.

I appreciate this opportunity to offer our recommendations about the **Afterschool and Summer Nutrition Programs** for your consideration.

As Congresswoman McCarthy knows very well, while Nassau County is perceived, understandably, as a well off suburb, in the Village of Hempstead, where we operate our nutrition programs, every school meets the 50% eligibility requirement for the school lunch program and, across Long Island in the 2006/7 school year, 167,000 children were enrolled. Need recognizes no political boundary.

My purpose today is to describe the impact that rising food costs will have on our Summer Food Programs, and on the low-income children and families who are struggling with rising food costs, but I want to remind us of the obvious: the federal Child Nutrition Programs address the basic nutritional needs of disadvantaged children who count on these programs for their best, most nutritious meals of the day.

I have brought with me some photos of children who participate in our Summer Feeding Programs in the Village of Hempstead. The first photo is of a boy already in our day care program and sure to benefit from the reauthorization. The second is a group of children in the Promise Project Summer Camp taken last Monday, on the first day of camp. Lastly, this is a group of our teenagers who are enjoying a well balanced meal.

These children represent the millions of children who today benefit from the meals that for most of them will be their best meals of the day, and for too many their **ONLY** meals of the day! For years Congress has commendably seen fit to protect these children and assure they have at least a basic level of nutrition so they can go about their important business of learning and playing.

Yes, ***playing***, our programs place a special emphasis on play because that is what we all know makes children creative, inquisitive, and imaginative, the very qualities they – and our country – need to compete in the future, if they and we are going to maintain our leadership position in the world.

No nutrition means no **energy**! No energy brings me to **fuel**.

Those speaking before me today have ably explained the interaction and economics of food and fuel. What I want to talk about is the impact of these rising costs have on my program. Many of the foods that are staples in the Summer Food Program have increased at a disproportionate rate, which makes it harder to provide meals without losing money. For example, from April 2007 to 2008, the

cost of milk increased by 13.5%. The impact of this on meal costs is substantial since all Summer Food meals must include milk. Bread increased by 14.1%, which significantly increases our costs since many of our meals include sandwiches. And cheese, a favorite with our kids, increased by 12%. These numbers are much higher than the 5.9% percent average increase in the cost of food.

This summer, the Summer Food reimbursement rate will not cover the full cost of the meals, but our County has made the decision to support Summer Food with our very limited local public dollars. The County will cover 21% of the cost of operating the Summer Food Program. We choose to do this, because we are committed to providing nutritious meals to the children who participate in our summer camps. We expect that 2,650 children will participate each day.

Obviously, the financial loss of operating the Summer Food Program makes sustainability an issue, but we all realize that the rising food costs, which are increasing the cost of summer meals, are hitting our low-income families really hard. Too many families in our community are struggling with rising food and transportation costs. These economic conditions make the Summer Food Program even more important for our community.

Imagine the impact of these rising costs on a family of four with fewer than \$1,000 to spend each month for everything they need except rent! These families were already struggling and things are just getting harder for them. What happens if they live in a community that is unable to subsidize the Summer Food Program or must significantly reduce the quality of the meals in order to run the program without losing money?

I worry for the Summer Food sponsors that do not have the capacity to subsidize the Summer Food Program. I wonder what will happen to the children who used to eat at these sites before the sponsors were forced to close their doors. The children still need access to those meals to get through their long summer vacation.

Our children cannot wait for these matters to right themselves. They need good nutrition now. This past weekend, as we celebrated some of the inalienable rights we hold sacred as a nation, I could not help but think that for me – thanks to the wisdom of Congress – one of these rights is that our country will not let our poorest and most vulnerable children go hungry. We believe children must, at the very least, have one (better two: breakfast and lunch) good, decent, nutritious meal a day! Congress leads the way in this regard, and I hope and suspect I am preaching to the choir when I implore you to make some much needed adjustments in the budget for the afterschool and summer nutrition programs, ensuring that our children can continue to learn and grow to become the very people who will sit in your seats tomorrow!

Though I realize it is not the purpose of today's hearing, and it is not within the Committee's jurisdiction, I would be remiss if I did not use this opportunity to urge Congress to at least temporarily increase food stamps at the earliest possible date. The low-income families that participate in my feeding programs would benefit greatly from immediate Congressional action designed to reverse the impact of this recession. Specifically, boosting the food stamp allotment by 20% (as the Senate proposed in the last economic stimulus package) would immediately increase the food purchasing power of the families we serve. Food Stamp benefits, which average \$1 per person per meal, have not kept pace with the sky-rocketing cost of food, which is only going to get

more costly. A boost in food stamp allotments would immediately result in more food – and more nutritious food - on the table of these families.

Next year, the Committee will be able to make significant improvements to the Afterschool and Summer Nutrition Programs through the Child Nutrition Reauthorization. Improving these programs is crucial. Nonprofit agencies like mine will not be able to bear these costs and will begin to drop out of these critically needed programs.

Even over a busy holiday weekend, our New York State Association of Family Service Agencies responded to my inquiry and endorsed the following proposals for reauthorization to improve these programs. Of course, we gladly support any improvements that can be made prior to reauthorization, such as through the appropriations process:

- The **Afterschool Snack Program** is an important resource, but it often does not provide children, especially teenagers, with enough food to get through the afternoon. If you have a teenager at home, I do not have to remind you how voracious an appetite they have after school and how important it is that they eat nutritionally balanced snacks - not just junk!
- Many afterschool programs are operating longer hours to better serve working families, which makes providing adequate nutrition even more important. Programs need to have the option of providing an evening meal if the program stretches into the late afternoon or evening hours.

The **Afterschool Supper Program** allows school-age children through age 19 to receive supper at an afterschool program located in a low-income area in **ONLY eight states**. (Fortunately, my state is one of them.) In most states only children **under age 13** may receive supper. The states which provide this option for older children are required to do significant administrative work for that privilege. I ask that you expand the Afterschool Supper Program with a minimum amount of paperwork for children through age 19 in all states and allow schools to provide suppers through the National School Lunch Program.

- Many afterschool and summer programs serving low-income children cannot participate in the federal nutrition programs, because they are not located in an area where 50% or more of the children are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals. The 50% requirement is not consistent with eligibility requirements for other federal afterschool and summer programs, most notably, the 21st Century Community Learning Center Program – the largest federal funding source for afterschool and summer programs – which requires 40%. It is especially difficult to meet the 50% requirement in rural communities, which do not have the same concentration of poverty found in metropolitan and suburban areas. I ask that you lower the threshold to 40% across the board.
- Providing nutritious snacks for \$0.68 cents or a healthy lunch for \$2.98 is an enormous challenge in our area and elsewhere not close to the sources of food. Increasing fuel prices will drive up the cost of meals and snacks in the coming months. We would also love to serve our children fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat milk, but the current reimbursement rates for the afterschool and summer nutrition programs make that next to

impossible. Please increase these rates, so that we can all provide our children more nutritious meals and snacks.

- As I am sure you know, many schools, local government agencies, and nonprofit organizations operate both afterschool and summer programs. Schools can provide meals to children year-round through the National School Lunch Program, which is terrific. Unfortunately, local government agencies and many nonprofits must switch back and forth between the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Summer Food Service Program, if they want to feed children year round. Again, this greatly increases administrative work, because each program has different applications, eligibility rules, and requirements. Your last reauthorization created a pilot in California which allowed year round local government agencies (not including schools) and nonprofits to use the **Summer Food Service Program** to feed children 365 days a year. I urge that this pilot be extended to all the states.

Colleagues tell me that the California pilot can and should also be improved. Currently, only snacks can be served during the school year. I recommend that children be eligible for suppers after school and meals on weekends and school holidays so that children will receive the nutrition their bodies need 365 days a year.

- Lastly, I implore you to give additional support to the Summer Food Service Program, which reaches fewer than one in five children who rely on the National School Lunch Program during the school year. The **Summer Food Program** needs to be strengthened with additional funding for food, transportation, outreach, start-up and expansion.

The 2009 Reauthorization of these nutrition programs provides the critical opportunity to improve the **Afterschool and Summer Nutrition Programs** so our most vulnerable children can learn and play after school and during the summer.

The nutritional value is obvious but must not be taken for granted. Across our country, these food programs have the important, added benefit of drawing children into quality programs like ours, which keep them engaged, safe and out of trouble, while their parents work. They boost student achievement and reduce juvenile crime and other at-risk behaviors.

We need more afterschool and summer programs to participate in these nutrition programs, so that more eligible children have access to nutritious food as well as food for their minds. I believe if the paperwork and administration are streamlined and the reimbursement for real costs modified, more nonprofits and faith-based organizations will step up to make these programs available to more children.

Please consider these recommendations and the others you are receiving and use the 2009 Reauthorization to improve these vital federal child nutrition programs. These programs need to be strengthened to better serve our children and teens both after school and during the summer.

Thank you so much for your consideration.