

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Food, Nutrition and Consumer Service
Statement of Nancy Montanez Johner, Under Secretary
Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture
Atlanta, GA
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am Nancy Montanez Johner, Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Joining me today are Kate Houston, Deputy Administrator for Special Nutrition Programs and Clarence Carter, Deputy Administrator for the Food Stamp Program.

I would also like to take this opportunity to introduce Don Arnette, Regional Administrator for the Food and Nutrition Service's Southeast Regional Office, located here in Atlanta. The Southeast Regional Office administers the agency's programs in Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky and Tennessee.

Mr. Chairman, the 15 domestic nutrition assistance programs administered by FNS work together to improve food security, fight hunger, and support healthy eating for children and low-income people across the Nation. The President's budget for Fiscal Year 2008 demonstrates the Administration's unwavering commitment to this mission by requesting a record level of \$59 billion dollars for these vital programs, which serve one in five Americans over the course of a year.

The Food Stamp Program is the Nation's primary nutrition assistance program, increasing food purchasing power for households with little income and few resources by providing benefits that are redeemed at retail grocery stores across the country. Over 26 million low-income people make use of the program to help put food on the table.

This program provides substantial benefits to low-income families with children, helping them to stretch their buying power. About half of all food stamp recipients are children, nearly 80 percent of food stamp benefits go to households with children, and over 80 percent of all children who are eligible for benefits receive them. On average, households with children receive about \$300 in food stamp benefits each month, with the amount varying based on the size and income level of the household. Food stamp households also benefit from nutrition education that is part of the program in every State - helping to promote thrifty shopping and healthy eating among food stamp clients.

The evidence is clear that the FSP makes an important difference in the lives of low-income children and families, and the others that it serves. With its nationwide standards for eligibility and benefits, it represents a national nutrition safety net for low-income families and individuals wherever they live. It is designed to expand automatically to respond to increased need when the economy is in recession and contracts when the economy is growing, making sure that food gets to people who need it, when they need it.

Perhaps most importantly, the FSP makes more food available to households that participate. Food stamp families are able to spend more on food than they would be able to without the

program, and providing benefits that can be spent only on food increases total food expenditures more than providing an equal amount of cash would. In addition, there is evidence that program participation can increase the availability of nutritious food in the home.

To sum up, Mr. Chairman - the Food Stamp Program works. That's why we're committed to ensuring effective program operations for all eligible people who wish to participate.

To meet that commitment, we have implemented outreach activities such as the national media campaign. The number one reason that people do not apply for food stamp benefits is because they do not realize that they are eligible. The national media campaign seeks to raise awareness of the nutrition benefits of food stamps and encourage low income people to seek out more information about their eligibility for this important benefit. National media campaign activities primarily consist of radio advertising in low income areas with low participation.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) also provides outreach materials for the Food Stamp Program including posters and flyers, as well as radio and television public service announcements, that State and local food stamp agencies and community and faith-based outreach providers can use in their local outreach efforts.

For the last four years, FNS has also awarded grants to community and faith-based organizations to implement and study promising outreach strategies. All of these outreach strategies are geared towards the working poor, including families with children, seniors, and legal immigrants, including citizen children of undocumented parents. On March 13, Secretary Johanns announced that an additional \$5 million in Food Stamp Program grants are available to improve the accessibility and awareness of USDA's Food Stamp Program for low-income households.

In addition to food stamps, FNS administers 14 nutrition assistance programs designed to complement the Food Stamp Program. These programs provide supplemental nutrition assistance for specific population groups. The other major nutrition assistance programs include:

? The Child Nutrition Programs (CNP), including the school meal (lunch and breakfast) program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), support nutritious meals and snacks served to over 31 million children in schools, child care institutions, and after-school care programs each day. In addition, the Summer Food Service (SFSP) Program and parts of the National School Lunch Program provide nutritious food to children in camps and other settings in the summer months, when school is not in session.

? And for the youngest children and infants, we operate the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC. WIC addresses the special needs of at-risk, low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and children up to five years of age. It provides 8 million participants monthly with supplemental food packages targeted to their dietary needs, nutrition education, and referrals to a range of health and social services; benefits that promote a healthy pregnancy for mothers and a healthy start for their children

? We also operate several commodity distribution programs that provide important nutrition

support to specific populations. Native Americans have the option of receiving commodity-based food packages in lieu of food stamps. This is especially important for those individuals living on remote reservations with limited access to affordable retail food stores. Likewise, through the Emergency Food Assistance Program, we provide foods and administrative funding to support our nation's network of food banks and soup kitchens--critical resources for families in need of immediate, but temporary, food assistance.

Mr. Chairman, being overweight or obese affects every part of our population, and addressing this problem is most important early in life, when eating and other health-related behaviors are developed. USDA has been providing nutrition guidance for more than a century, and nutrition guidance has evolved with the changing needs of a changing world and advances in our knowledge about nutrition. The policies that shape USDA nutrition assistance programs are aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which are published jointly by the Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture, and revised every five years to ensure that policy is based on current scientific and medical knowledge. They provide sound, science-based advice to promote health and lessen the risk of major chronic diseases.

In fact, we are in the process of updating our program meal patterns to align with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines. Updates to the WIC food package were recently proposed. Later this year, we plan to publish a proposed rule updating the nutrition standards for school meal patterns to bring them in line with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program meal patterns will be updated shortly thereafter.

Other efforts have been taken to promote better nutrition, particularly in the school meal programs. Over the past two decades, USDA has worked to reduce the levels of fat, sodium, and sugar in the commodities that we make available to schools and other outlets. These commodities are measurably healthier than in years past. Today USDA offers more than 180 quality products to choose from, including whole grains and low-fat foods.

In recent years, USDA pioneered a partnership with the Department of Defense's Supply Center in Philadelphia to deliver over 60 types of fresh fruits and vegetables to schools. Schools have been receiving \$50 million worth of these products for several years.

USDA established the HealthierUS School Challenge to recognize those schools that have demonstrated a commitment to a healthy school nutrition environment. To date, 108 elementary schools have won gold or silver awards for healthy menu planning, often using fruit and vegetable offerings, whole grain products and the lower fat meats offered through the commodity program and for providing students with nutrition education and an opportunity for physical activity. The School Challenge is a component of President Bush's government-wide Healthier US Initiative. The Initiative brings together resources throughout the federal government to help Americans make simple improvements to our nutrition, physical activity and behavior. It calls on government, the private sector, local communities, and individuals to partner together to fight obesity and improve health.

Congress also recognized the role schools can play in curbing childhood obesity by requiring all school districts participating in USDA school meal programs to establish "Wellness Policies". These local wellness policies address the nutrition guidelines for foods sold on

campuses, nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities to promote student wellness.

Additionally, each major program promotes healthy eating and active lifestyles through nutrition education and promotion. Nutrition education and services are provided to WIC participants in conjunction with other parts of the WIC benefit to improve birth outcomes and promote childhood immunization, and breastfeeding. Team Nutrition is a comprehensive, integrated plan to promote good nutrition through the Child Nutrition Programs. Team Nutrition provides nutrition education materials for use in schools and child care centers and technical assistance for food service providers. We also promote nutrition education across programs through the Eat Smart. Play Hard. Campaign, and by working with State agencies that operate the programs on State Nutrition Action Plans, to foster integrated cross-program strategies.

Nutrition education efforts are not limited to the Child Nutrition Programs but are also provided by States to food stamp recipients. The program represents a prime opportunity to reach low-income families and encourage healthy practices that can last a lifetime.

The FSP clearly has been a major benefit to low-income households over the years. Children in the FSP have also benefited from the increased commitment to nutrition education as a component part of the Program. Considered an optional benefit for States, spending in the area of nutrition education has increased over the last fifteen years. For example, in FY 1992, FNS approved \$661,000 for Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) efforts conducted by seven State agencies. This year, FNS approved \$275 million in federal funds for fifty-two State or State-related agencies to provide FSNE. It is important to note that FSNE plays a valuable role in helping to communicate the Dietary Guidelines for Americans to low-income audiences. This includes promotion of MyPyramid and its various iterations such as MyPyramid for Children and MiPiramide.

To that end, FNS has also developed a series of nutrition education and promotional materials targeting women with children entitled Loving Your Family, Feeding Their Future: Nutrition Education through the Food Stamp Program. These materials are designed for Food Stamp mothers who may possess low levels of literacy and who may be Spanish speakers. These materials can be used in any setting with similar target audiences, such as the WIC Program. The anticipated release date of these materials is May 2007.

The Food Stamp Nutrition Connection is a website designed to provide training and information resources to FSP nutrition educators, and it provides more than 150 nutrition education resources for children. In January 2007, there were 139,805 hits to this site which represents a 100 percent increase over the previous January.

For a preview of our excellent resource materials please visit our web sites at:

? <http://foodstamp.nal.usda.gov>

? <http://www.fns.usda.gov/eatsmartplayhardkids/Library/actsheets.htm>

(For children in Spanish and English)

Mr. Chairman, we are using the 2007 Farm Bill process to further improve program access and facilitate future self-sufficiency. The Administration's reform-minded and fiscally responsible proposals build on the successes of the 2002 Farm Bill - which include raising food stamp

participation rates among eligible populations, restoring eligibility for many legal immigrants, and providing new flexibility for States to tailor services to better serve their clients. The 2002 Farm Bill improved access, strengthened integrity, and provided careful stewardship of the taxpayer dollars.

For instance, it was my pleasure to award a \$1 million grant last year to the Georgia Department of Human Resources to create a web-based food stamp application system in partnership with Georgia Cares in the Division of Aging Services and Christ Lutheran Church, a faith-based organization.

FNS strongly supports State modernization efforts to improve access, integrity, and efficiency. Eleven States have State-wide electronic applications and 3 others are piloting operations. Eighteen States have call centers - and my staff tells me there's a very fine one here in Atlanta.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to take a moment to highlight a few of our 2007 Farm Bill Proposals. These proposals represent the culmination of a great deal of planning and listening to our partners and stakeholders across the country.

We propose to strengthen efforts to integrate nutrition education into the Food Stamp Program by recognizing in the Food Stamp Act of 1977 that nutrition education is a component of the program and investing \$100 million to establish a five-year competitive grants demonstration program targeted at developing and testing solutions to the rising rates of obesity. These grants will allow us to evaluate creative and innovative solutions in this complex area, such as point-of-sale incentives to purchase fruits and vegetables, increased access among food stamp recipients to farmers markets, and integrated initiatives that use multiple communication channels to reinforce key messages. These initiatives would include rigorous evaluations to identify effective strategies. This is important, as the Committee knows, because of the serious health threats of obesity and overweight that threaten American citizens, but is even more critical when we consider the impact it has on our nation's children.

We also propose to change the name of the Food Stamp Program. Our State partners administering the Food Stamp Program have been asking the Department for years to consider a name change that is more descriptive of the current Program. Stamps, later replaced by coupons, have not been used for many years and the name does not reflect the Program's mission of reducing hunger and improving nutrition among low-income people. Further, implementation of EBT has made food stamps and the Program name outdated. Finally, some stakeholders suggest that the name is a barrier to participation because of stigma, especially among the elderly. FNS began gathering public comments on a new name in June 2004. While there is no consensus on a new name, the vast majority of the comments supported a name change with certain words commonly included in the suggestions--food and nutrition.

Next, our proposals to increase program access include:

? Eliminating the cap on the dependent care deduction - Current policy supports work or participation in work services by providing for limited deductions from the family's gross income associated with the cost of dependent care when determining food stamp eligibility and benefit amount: a cap of \$200 per month for children under 2 and \$175 for other dependent children is the current policy. The cap was set back in 1993. It is time to eliminate the cap,

which would simplify State administration and help working families with children.

? Excluding the value of college savings plans from the resource limit. This proposal would expand the savings plans eligible for exclusion from the resource limit when determining food stamp eligibility and would simplify administration for the States. Most significantly, it supports working poor, encourages focused savings for children's futures, and recognizes that households should not have to deplete college savings plans in order to get nutrition assistance. This proposal will exclude from the resource calculation the value of college savings plans that the IRS recognizes for tax purposes, including 529 plans operated by most States.

? Excluding combat-related military pay - Enhanced pay from military deployment can sometimes cause families receiving food stamps to no longer be eligible for this assistance. This policy change would ensure that military families are not penalized for doing their patriotic duty. It supports the families of servicemen and servicewomen fighting overseas by ensuring that their families back home do not have their benefits reduced as a result of the additional deployment income. This proposal has been a part of the President's budget for several years and was first enacted in the 2005 Appropriations Act; this farm bill proposal would make this annual policy fix permanent.

? Encouraging savings for retirement -This proposal simplifies food stamp resource policy and makes it more equitable because under current law some retirement accounts are excluded and some are included when determining eligibility. This proposal supports the President's Ownership Society Initiative, by increasing the ability of low-income people to save for retirement. It is expected, when fully implemented, to add approximately 100,000 persons to the program and to increase benefits by \$592 million over 5 years. The majority of the new participants will be workers and their families, most with children, but also improves access for elderly.

Beyond the \$100 million in obesity-prevention grants, we also propose to improve nutrition for children by:

? Adding new mandatory funding for the purchase of additional fruits and vegetables for use in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. This \$500 million of funding over 10 years represents a net increase in the total purchase of fruits and vegetables for school meals over levels available under any other authorities.

? Conducting a survey of foods purchased by school food authorities with Federal cash assistance once every 5 years. The most recent data on school food purchases are a decade old. These data would help USDA efforts to 1) provide guidance and technical assistance to school food professionals in the implementation of new rules intended to conform school meal patterns to the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans; 2) better manage the types and varieties of commodities procured by the Department on behalf of schools; and 3) assess the economic impact of school food purchases on various commodity sectors.

? Increasing Section 32 spending on fruits and vegetables by \$2.75 billion over 10 years. This proposal will increase the availability of fruits and vegetables to low-income individuals and school children participating in nutrition assistance programs, and the consumption of these healthful foods will contribute to the improved health of program participants. This provision

will benefit farmers, as well as schools, soup kitchens, and food banks, after school programs, and other entities that receive USDA commodities. The Emergency Food Assistance Program, known as "TEFAP," would likely be a major beneficiary of this additional funding--which would offset the recent decline in bonus commodities that has affected many TEFAP providers.

? Our Farm Bill proposal also will streamline another food assistance program to improve administration and efficiency by making TEFAP State Plans permanent and allowing States to submit revisions to the plan only when changes occur. This proposal is designed to reduce the paperwork burden for State agencies and increase administrative flexibility.

? USDA is also proposing that TEFAP States use a competitive process to select local agencies, and re-compete grants at least once every three years. Failure to select local agencies competitively results in barriers to some local organizations, including faith based groups, and can also result in a less effective local TEFAP distribution system in the long run.

In closing Mr. Chairman, these proposals will help us continue to lead the fight against hunger, and the level of commitment to this task remains high. But we still know that there is more to do. We are continuing to improve program operations, get benefits to those who are already eligible, but do not participate, and keep our eye on program integrity in the process.

Thank you for holding this hearing; I am very pleased to be here. I would also like to thank the Atlanta Community Food Bank for allowing us to be here today and for the wonderful work they do in this community. We will be happy to answer any questions you have at this time.

References

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