

Testimony of
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Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the United States Senate

March 4, 2009

Thank you Mr. Chairman for inviting me to present testimony today on behalf of meals served to children out of the school day. These meals are one of the best ways to improve nutrition for America's children in difficult economic times. It is my hope that my remarks will be of assistance to your committee for the reauthorization of the child nutrition programs.

My name is Lucy Nolan and I am the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut!, a Connecticut anti-hunger and food security organization that does outreach, education and advocacy with emphasis on the federal food programs. End Hunger Connecticut! has extensive outreach and program experience on the summer nutrition program, afterschool snacks and the Child and Adult Care Assistance Food Program (CACFP), as well as WIC, School Breakfast, school meals and SNAP. It is with that in mind that I would like to address the committee.

Today, I am here to testify about the importance of the afterschool and summer nutrition programs and to make recommendations to improve these programs so they are better able to serve the children and teens that desperately need them. The afterschool and summer nutrition programs are designed to provide nutritious meals and snacks to children when they are not at school—at programs operating before or after school, on weekends, and during school holidays. In Connecticut, schools, local government agencies, and private nonprofits all play an important role in sponsoring and connecting children to these important programs.

These programs have a vital role to play in countering childhood obesity in addition to combating childhood hunger. The programs provide nutritious meals and snacks that meet federal nutrition standards. Research finds that children gain more weight during the summer months, which is when they lose access to school breakfast and lunch, and also shows that adolescent girls that eat at least one meal at school during the school year are less likely to be overweight. The meals from these programs are often better nutritionally than those that children may or may not get at home and sponsors all across the country are working to increase the quality of the meals.

After school and summer programs provide educational and enrichment activities for low income children and the nutrition programs are what allows them to work in a variety of ways. The food helps draw children into quality programs that keep them engaged, safe and out of trouble while their parents are working. The after school hours and the time during the summer when children and teens are left unsupervised is the time they are most likely to get into trouble. Studies document that juvenile crime peaks between the hours of three and six—the time between school ending and parents arriving home from work. This is also the time when children are most likely to become victims of crimes, when they are most likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol, and when teenage girls are at the highest risk of becoming pregnant.

The nutrition programs also help strengthen the afterschool and summer programs by providing a stable on-going funding source that supports program sustainability. The nutrition funds free up dollars that were previously spent on food and now can be spent on expanding services, adding programming, or purchasing computers and other equipment. At one site in eastern Connecticut, the site supervisor used the ongoing summer meals as a way to impart very critical dental and health information to the children and their parents by asking Public Health and Dental Students from the University of Connecticut to come and work with the children, including giving away toothbrushes and toothpaste.

The afterschool and summer nutrition programs are also important during these difficult economic times, because they infuse federal funds directly into low-income communities. This support helps public and private agencies, which are coping with strained resources and increased participation at the state and local level. The funding also immediately stimulates local economies since programs purchase food from local stores and vendors and need to hire additional staff to operate programs.

There are a number of ways to improve the afterschool and summer nutrition programs in reauthorization, and I encourage you to make changes that increase low-income children's access, expand and improve current benefits, make it easier for afterschool and summer programs to participate, and support the current structure---that the programs are entitlements, ready to serve every eligible person, and that they provide meals and snacks that meet nutrition standards.

Area Eligibility

One of the many great things about the afterschool and summer nutrition programs is that they allow the afterschool or summer program to qualify, rather than going through the difficult process of individually qualifying each child. Any afterschool or summer program located in an area where 50 percent or more of the children are low-income can participate. This saves a tremendous amount of time and administrative work, and significantly increases participation. In fact, few afterschool and summer programs participate in the nutrition programs when they are required to document each child's household income.

Yet, the 50 percent requirement is too high and keeps too many programs that serve low-income children from participating. In Connecticut, like most states, there are many communities with significant numbers of low-income children that do not meet the 50 percent requirement. This 50 percent area eligibility test is the most restrictive test the programs have ever had. Requiring programs to be located in areas in which more than half the children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals means that many low-income children in Connecticut and other states have lost access to nutritious meals and snacks and this is especially true now, as many communities are redistricting students to create schools in which there is a mix of low to moderate to high income families. Our rural and suburban areas have an especially difficult time meeting the 50 percent requirement since poverty is less concentrated.

The 50 percent requirement is not consistent with previous policy—prior to 1981, the threshold for an area participating in Summer Food was 33 percent—or current non-food based federal support for afterschool and summer programs. The federal 21st Century Community Learning Center program, which provides federal funding to many afterschool and summer programs, and Title I schools both require 40 percent of the population to be low-income. Lowering the threshold back to 33 percent or reducing it to at least 40 percent will allow more low-income children to receive the nutritious meals and snacks their bodies need, and ease the administrative burdens of programs seeking funding streams with incompatible area eligibility tests.

Summer Nutrition

The Summer Nutrition Programs are critical for low-income families in Connecticut. Summer is an extremely difficult time for low-income families in Connecticut and across the country. When the school year ends, low-income families who rely on school breakfast and lunch to feed their

children during the school year lose access to those meals. Not surprisingly, hunger goes up during the summer months, and the demand for emergency food increases. Research also has shown that obesity increases at a higher rate during the summer than it does during the school year, proving not only is there a need for nutritious meals but for outdoor activities as well.

In Connecticut, we're seeing a growing connection between Summer Nutrition Program and community gardens and subsequent healthy eating. For instance, in Middletown, Connecticut a group of Wesleyan University students that run a small Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) organization named Long Lane worked with three summer nutrition sites to start and maintain a community garden. This was funded through a small grant from End Hunger Connecticut!. The students organized taste-testing of fruits and vegetables provided through the CSA or other local farms. Through discussions and hands-on activities, such as working with compost, caring for plants, and creating scarecrows, children gained first-hand knowledge of where food comes from, which created a new outlook on different foods and their nutritious value. The trial programming was so successful the local community health center started an enrolled summer camp appropriately named, "In the Garden". As a result, the structure of the summer nutrition combined with the educational programming has promoted healthier eating while addressing hunger and constructive summer-time activities in Middletown. Additionally, a one time small grant became a sustained program in the community.

Summer Nutrition Programs participation continues to be too low. It is the most underutilized child nutrition programs. During the summer, Connecticut serves about one in five of the low-income children who eat school lunch during the school year. Surprisingly, our low participation still places Connecticut eighth nationally for feeding children during the summer according to numbers produced by the Food Research and Action Center. Nationally, less than one in five, only 17.7 for every 100 low-income children served during the school year eats a nutritious lunch during the summer.

It is not an accident that participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs is so low. Over the years, the Summer Food Service Program has suffered a series of critical blows that have made it more difficult to serve needy children over summer vacations. The recent enactment of the "Simplified Summer Food Program" will help, and Connecticut was very grateful to be added to this important program. Two of our cities with high child poverty, Hartford and New London, changed to the "Simplified Summer Food Program" this past summer and saw huge increases in

the number of children participating – yet there were still many children who are eligible that did not.

Still, a bigger boost is needed to get the program back on track. A significant investment that increases reimbursement rates at least to restore 1996 funding levels (when rates were cut by 10 percent), adjusted for inflation, will mean that many more community-based and school-based programs will be willing to provide summer food. The 2001 Summer Food study found that 72 percent of sponsors did not expect the reimbursement rates to cover their costs. In fact, many sponsors in Connecticut have subsidized the low federal reimbursement since it was cut in 1996. Now, during these extremely difficult times when children and families need the Summer Nutrition Programs even more, the sponsors are finding it difficult if not impossible to continue supplementing the summer nutrition funding that they receive.

In addition, the lunches served through the Summer Food should receive the commodity support that lunches served through the National School Lunch Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) receive. And the Summer Food breakfasts along with the breakfasts served at school and through CACFP should receive commodity support. Of course, small Summer Food sponsors and rural sponsors should be given the option of receiving cash-in-lieu of commodities. Otherwise, the transportation costs can be higher than the value of the commodities.

The program also can be strengthened by providing additional funding for: transportation to get children to and from sites; outreach to let potential sponsors and sites know that they can participate and to inform families where the program is available; and start-up and expansion costs to support sponsors' efforts to feed more children during the summer months. End Hunger Connecticut! found that a small bit of concentrated outreach can increase participation significantly.

End Hunger Connecticut! has a small grants program named "Operation Participation" to encourage more children receiving free summer meals through Summer Nutrition Programs. Grants of \$750 are given to sponsors to creatively increase participation at their sites. Efforts include organizing promotional and recreational activities, such as raffles, themed-activity days, nutrition games, and gardening workshops. Last summer, the five awarded sponsors served more than 18,000 additional meals and 400 more children each day! The supplementary funds go a long way in feeding more children and providing opportunities for a fun, safe, and constructive

summer. Other states have similar grants programs that have had just as much success. The federal reimbursement is currently not enough to fund such outreach efforts that help make the programs financially stable and sustainable. We found that as more children came and experienced the activities with the meals they told other children and they came as well. It is a very effective way of getting the word out.

The low participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs has prompted some policymakers to suggest increasing the food stamp allotment for families with children during the summer months. Initially this sounds like a good idea, but there are a number of problems with the approach. First, the food stamp allotment needs to be increased for everyone across the board. The current allotment does not allow families to purchase a healthful diet. Second, this change would be extremely difficult for states and USDA to administer – as it stands in Connecticut the waiting time to receive SNAP benefits can be well over the 8 weeks the summer nutrition programs may be open. Third, in order for the increase in benefits to have any real impact, it would be extremely costly and would make it difficult to make any other improvements to the child nutrition programs. And fourth, and I believe most importantly, the strength of the Summer Nutrition Programs goes over and beyond providing food and being an anti-hunger program. It helps to give low-income children the summer that we all have fond memories of---being outside, in a supervised and safe setting, learning outside the classroom, swimming, running, and playing with our friends. In fact, it would be helpful and would increase participation if the sponsors would be allowed to serve an additional meal or snack, a third meal to children.

Afterschool

The Afterschool Snack Program is an important resource, but the snack funding often does not provide children, especially teens, with enough food to get through the afternoon. In Connecticut, after school snacks are provided to various age groups- from pre-k to high school and very much promote an overall healthy school environment by intervening at a time when faculty might bring in high sugar fruit juices, soda, chips or candy. Many afterschool programs are operating longer hours to better serve working families, which makes providing adequate nutrition on a snack budget even harder, and good nutrition even more important. Programs need to be able to provide an evening meal if the program stretches into the late afternoon/evening hours.

Currently, only ten states—Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and West Virginia—are included in the Supper Program. This

leaves afterschool programs in the remaining 40 states, as well as the District of Columbia, without the resources to provide the nutritious food that children and teens need in order to continue learning throughout the afternoon. The Afterschool Supper Program is administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and like all child nutrition programs the meals served must comply with USDA nutrition guidelines.

The Afterschool Supper Program also helps to ensure that children have access to nutritious meals and snacks on the weekends and during school holidays, since programs will be able to serve each child a meal and a snack. We have heard too many times that children do not have access to the nutrition they need on weekends and during school holidays, and the existing child nutrition programs need to be strengthened to better fill this gap. Several years ago I was told by a food service worker in the Hartford schools that the Monday after Thanksgiving vacation the line for school breakfast was especially long and many more children showed up than expected. The reason? So many of them did not have food over the 4 days they were out of school.

Connecticut and most other states are not included in this crucial program. In non-supper states, a different set of rules applies: only children under age 13 can receive suppers; and in order to provide suppers, the afterschool program has to do a tremendous amount of administrative work. I ask you to expand the Afterschool Supper Program to all states and also improve it so that school-based programs can provide suppers through the National School Lunch Program, which will significantly reduce unnecessary administrative work for schools. Please let them expend energy on feeding the children and not on filling out reams of paperwork.

Year-Round Programs

The Committee should also streamline the child nutrition programs to enable schools, local government agencies, and non-profits to feed children 365 days a year through one seamless child nutrition program. Children in Connecticut need quality programs after school, on week-ends and school holidays, and during the summer. Schools, local government agencies, and nonprofits are providing these services, but they currently must operate multiple child nutrition programs in order to feed children year-round. For example, a school may operate the school breakfast and lunch programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (to provide meals at afterschool and weekend programs), and the Summer Food Service Program. Other eligible out-of-school time sponsors (local government agencies and private nonprofits) must operate both the Summer Food

Service Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program in order to feed children year-round.

The redundant paperwork required to participate in multiple nutrition programs does not improve program integrity, but raises administrative costs and discourages eligible sponsors from participating, resulting in only a fraction of eligible children receiving meals and snacks year-round. Streamlining could be done by making child nutrition programs look seamless from the viewpoint of schools and other eligible sponsors. As we weather this current economic storm more and more children will be taking advantage of these programs. Everything must be done to make them as accessible and yet as efficient as possible. Creating one meal program will increase participation, increase efficiencies and allow for both sponsors and children to know where their next meal is coming from.

I urge you to consider my recommendations and use the Reauthorization as an opportunity to improve the federal nutrition programs, so they better meet the needs of children and teens, after school, on weekends and school holidays, and during the summer. These programs feed not only the belly but the character of the participating children. Children that are fed nutritious meals on a regular basis will do better in school, will do better in play and will grow up to be the children that we want to run our world.

Thank you.