

STATEMENT OF THOMAS VILSACK
SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION AND
FORESTRY

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Madam Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the pending reauthorization of the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Child Nutrition Programs and WIC program. The first item that the President discussed with me when I was first selected for this job was for USDA to provide our children with healthier, more nutritious meals. I pledged then and continue to uphold that pledge -- the USDA will do everything it can to support the health of our children and the health of the school environment in thousands of schools across the country.

BACKGROUND

The reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Programs presents us with an important opportunity to combat child hunger and improve the health and nutrition of children across the nation. The Obama Administration has proposed a historic investment of \$10 billion in additional funding over ten years to improve our Child Nutrition Programs. It is designed to significantly reduce the barriers that keep children from participating in school nutrition programs, improve the quality of school meals and the health of the school environment, and enhance program performance. This is a once in every five year opportunity to modernize the core child nutrition programs: the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Special Milk Program, and the WIC Program.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) reaches 31.4 million children in more than 100,000 schools each day, with over 60 percent of the lunches served at free or reduced price. USDA purchases roughly 15-20 percent of foods used in the NSLP for schools based on their selections. The remaining 80-85 percent of program foods are acquired directly by schools through commercial channels, in part using funding provided by USDA to reimburse food and labor costs. Students are certified for free or reduced-price meals based on their family's income, helping to make the program accessible to those at greatest need.

The NSLP was enacted in 1946 as a necessary response to the widespread malnutrition-related health problems revealed among young draftees during World War II; leaders in Congress also recognized that nutritious lunches would contribute to success in schools. Our understanding of the links between nutrition, health, and education have grown over time, and the program has responded with changes that make the program more accessible to low-income children, and improve the content of meals to reflect the day's nutrition science. Through these changes, the core nutrition and education mission behind school meals remains just as important, if not more important, today.

Similarly, the School Breakfast Program (SBP) is available in over 88,000 schools and about 11 million children participate on an average day. As with the NSLP, students are certified for free or reduced-price meals based on their family's income. Over 80 percent of SBP meals are served to low-income children for free or at a reduced price. And we note promising strategies in SBP such as meals in the classroom, intended to overcome logistical challenges and improve participation.

States that agree to participate in these programs have the responsibility to serve meals that meet science-based nutrition standards. USDA's role, in addition to providing funding and setting those standards, is to provide the training and technical assistance that can enable States and schools to deliver meals that are nutritious and appeal to children.

Today, we also recognize that the need for nutrition does not end during the summer months when school is out. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides meals to children during those months in conjunction with their participation in summer programs at schools, playgrounds and other community sites. Unfortunately – and despite long-time efforts – the program as it currently operates does not have the breadth and depth necessary to provide the nutrition support that the school meals programs do during the school year. One major challenge is to improve access to food in the summer well beyond the 2.2 million children currently served in SFSP.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) supports the provision of healthful meals through preschool child care and also includes after school care programs, along with other community settings. Currently serving about 3.2 million children on an average day in child care homes and centers, CACFP supports the health and education of the children that participate in these programs, and enhances the ability of child care providers to ensure quality care. We know that healthy eating habits are established early in the lives of young children, and quality food and nutrition in child care and after school can be a sound, effective foundation piece.

Finally, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) continues to serve as both a supplemental nutrition program and as a gateway to the health care system. WIC provides supplemental foods to pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women, infants and children. WIC reaches nearly 9.1 million people each month. About half of the infants in the United States participate and benefit from the WIC program. The new food packages that participants began to receive last month in all States, territories, and tribal communities now include fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and less fat, along with other changes to reflect the latest nutrition recommendations.

Meal adequacy, food safety and nutrition education are each central to the missions of these programs, and USDA works actively to ensure that each program works to make safe and nutritious meals a reality for every child it serves.

USDA contracted with the National Academies' Institute of Medicine (IOM) to provide evidence and science-based recommendations for the foods offered in these programs so that they address the need for us to include more fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy, fewer "empty" calories. The IOM recommendations were used to update the WIC food package.

Just last month, IOM released recommendations to USDA to improve school meals, which pave the way for the first major revision of the nutrition standards for school meals since 1995. And this month, the IOM convened the panel that will be recommending improvements to the CACFP by this time next year.

In the meantime, we are continuing to advance our nutrition and food safety responsibilities. The Department recently expanded the HealthierUS School Challenge, which recognizes schools that voluntarily achieve new levels of commitment to improving the nutrition environment, to middle and high schools. Over 600 schools have now been recognized. We also provide schools with a range of educational and technical assistance materials that promote fruits and vegetables and other key aspects of the Dietary Guidelines. The Department recently released a Menu Planner for Healthy School Meals, which will help schools improve their menu plans: serving more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, and lower amounts of sugar, sodium, and saturated and *trans* fats in school menus. And we are preparing to release an online toolkit for assisting schools in meeting the HealthierUS School Challenge. This toolkit will include resources to assist schools in assessing and improving their food offerings, including an online calculator to determine the nutritional content of meals sold outside of the meal programs. We also provide support and assistance for school wellness policies, through which communities can work together to support a healthful food and physical activity environment for their children at school.

With regard to food safety, USDA recognizes our special responsibility to protect the health of the children we serve, and is committed to a comprehensive, coordinated approach to food safety for the school meals programs. Our hold and recall procedures, including the Rapid Alert system, helps to assure that we are able to act quickly to prevent issues with regard to USDA foods from impacting our clients. USDA also communicates with the Food and Drug Administration on recalls of FDA-regulated foods and other food safety concerns that may impact school meals. We continue to work with schools to ensure that they have robust food safety programs based on hazard analysis-critical control point (HACCP) principles, and provide resources such as the Food-Safe Schools Action Guide and other technical assistance to promote food safety excellence in every school.

CHALLENGES

As more of us become aware of the importance of eating well and exercising, we find ourselves at a unique moment where leaders at all levels of society – State and local officials, school nutrition professionals, the food industry, public health professionals, and many others – are asking what they can do to improve the health and nutrition of our children.

Obesity and the health conditions that it causes are related to poor diets and under-consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Children and youth are also not as physically active as experts recommend to prevent obesity and promote good health. The most recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System found that only about one-third [34.7%] of high school students met recommended levels of physical activity. Only about half [53.6%] had physical education classes even once a week, while about one-quarter [24.9%] of students played video or computer games for 3 or more hours on an average school day, and about one-third [35.4%] of students watched television 3 or more hours on an average school day. This, too, contributes greatly to the “energy balance” problem that leads to obesity.

At the same time, we face a continuing problem for some families being unable to provide their children enough to eat. The Department released a report, “Household Food Security in the United States, 2008” showing that in over 500,000 families with children in 2008, one or more children simply do not get enough to eat--they had to cut the size of their meals, skip meals, or even go whole days without food at some time during the year. This is simply unacceptable in a nation as wealthy and developed as the United States.

Furthermore, any teacher can tell you that the relationship between healthy eating, nutrition, and learning is as dramatic as the linkage between nutrition and health. Breakfast is particularly important in this regard; research shows that eating a good breakfast is linked to better school performance and classroom behavior, and fewer visits to the school nurse. Investing in meal quality and access to these critical programs will help support the capacity of our young people to learn and acquire the tools necessary to become the leaders of tomorrow.

OPPORTUNITIES/BROAD IMPACT

As more of us become aware of the importance of eating well and exercising, we find ourselves at a unique moment where leaders at all levels of society – States and cities, school nutrition professionals, the food industry, public health professionals, and many more – have begun to take steps to do their part to improve the health and nutrition of our children.

The legislation we are discussing today has the potential to shape important and much-needed changes in our nutrition environment as a Nation – with the prospect of better health and well-being in the years to come.

We can improve access to meals and explore new means of empowering communities to reduce food insecurity and hunger, especially among our children. We can make every school a place where nutrition and learning shape the food offered by improving the quality of meals, eliminating foods that do not support healthful choices, and expanding physical activity opportunities.

We can help pregnant women, new mothers, and the youngest children receive the support they need for an optimally healthy start, and support working families using child care, by providing nutritious food for their children, to help them deal with the challenges of today’s economy.

This is the power of these programs – and the opportunity we share to harness that power for a better future.

Beyond these food security, nutrition, health and learning objectives, the reauthorization is an important opportunity to promote economic development and a robust farm and food economy. The Child Nutrition and WIC Programs are significant outlets for the bounty of American farmers and ranchers. Each year, USDA purchases approximately \$1.5 billion of healthy foods through its commodity distribution programs. As we continue to move toward the standards recommended by the Institute of Medicine, USDA and schools will increasingly purchase more fruits and vegetables, whole grain items, and low fat dairy products. These purchases will increase our support for the entire agriculture value chain – from growers to packers, shippers, manufacturers, to retailers – creating a stimulative economic impact.

This legislation is critical – not only for nutrition, but for health promotion, educational opportunity, and economic development. For these reasons, I'm appreciative of the opportunity to appear before this Committee to discuss some of the Obama Administration's top priorities for this legislation and to express my commitment to work with you to pursue a robust reauthorization that advances these key priorities.

PRIORITIES

The Administration has two main priorities for Child Nutrition and WIC programs that I will discuss this morning: (1) reducing barriers and improving access; and (2) enhancing nutritional quality and the health of the school environment. Improving program performance is also important to us, and we will be attentive to that goal throughout the reauthorization process.

We must take steps to reduce barriers, improve participation, and work to eliminate childhood hunger in this country. For many children in our programs, School Lunch and Breakfast represents the only healthy food that they eat all day. We must work to ensure access to nutrition assistance for children, when and where they need it, particularly during the "gap periods," when we know children struggle to receive the nutrition they need - summer months, during breakfast, and in after-school environments.

Participation in USDA meals programs during the summer, on average, is less than 20% of the participation level on a typical school day, and food insecurity among children tends to increase during the summer. We must find new methods to encourage summer service providers to participate in the SFSP, and to operate for longer during the summer. We also must find alternative means to get nutritious food to children when school is not in session, building on the \$85 million provided for this purpose by Congress in the FY 2010 agriculture appropriations bill.

We also need to expand the School Breakfast Program. Healthy days begin with healthy breakfasts. Many teachers report that they can tell which of their children had healthy breakfasts and which did not. 100,000 schools offer lunch, and 88,000 offer breakfast. But, , average daily participation in breakfast is far lower than in lunch – only about 11 million on an average school day, compared to 31 million for lunch. We must support efforts to increase the number of schools offering breakfast and the participation of eligible children in the program, and look for ways to support improvements in the nutritional quality of school breakfasts as well.

For school meals more generally, we must find and test innovative approaches and determine their effectiveness in addressing hunger among children, including modifications to counting and claiming processes in very low-income areas. Support should be provided to communities and States committed to ending the scourge of hunger. Lastly, support should be provided to direct certification efforts that automatically enroll eligible children in these programs. The Department will use the \$22 million in Direct Certification Grants recently approved in the agriculture appropriations bill to encourage States to enhance their existing direct certification systems with new technologies or with ideas borrowed from States with demonstrated direct certification success.

We must do everything we can to improve the nutritional quality of school meals and the health of the school environment. On school days, participating children consume as many as half of their calories at school.

While improved school meals are critical to our nutrition and obesity prevention goals, the challenges of helping kids stay healthy extend beyond reimbursable school meals. Children are subject to innumerable influences in their environment. As they develop preferences and practices that will last a lifetime, their choices are shaped by their surroundings—at home, in school, and in their wider community. The school nutrition environment is a powerful influence in this regard. Accordingly, the Administration recommends setting higher standards for all foods sold in school, and related policies and programs to ensure that the school environment is a positive influence on children's diets, their physical activity choices, and their health. Our approach reflects the critical role that the school can play in the effort to promote healthful lifestyles and combat obesity. We believe that these efforts, combined with additional nutrition initiatives in the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the WIC program, will substantially contribute to improved nutrition and health outcomes for America's children.

Specific priorities in this area include:

- Establishing improved nutrition standards for school meals based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and taking additional steps to ensure compliance with these standards.
- Providing parents and students better information about school nutrition and meal quality.
- Creating national baseline standards for all foods sold in elementary, middle, and high schools to ensure they contribute effectively to a healthy diet.
- Promoting increased consumption of whole grains, fruits and vegetables, low- and fat-free milk through innovative food service delivery systems based on behavioral economics.
- Strengthening school wellness policy implementation and promoting physical activity in schools.
- Ensuring that child nutrition professionals have the skills to serve top-quality meals that are both healthful and appealing to their student customers.
- Expanding the current requirements of the food safety program to all facilities where food is stored, prepared and served.
- Expanding support for breastfeeding – the medically-preferred feeding practice for most infants – in the WIC Program, especially through expansion of the peer counseling program.

It is critical for USDA to establish improved nutrition standards for school meals, as well as national standards for all food sold in schools, including in the á la carte lines and in vending machines, to ensure that they too contribute to a healthy diet.

More information must be provided to parents on the performance of schools so that they can make choices for their children, and take action to help schools improve. We recommend that schools be required to share information about the content of their meals with the families that rely upon them.

We also need to do everything we can to facilitate relationships between farms and schools, so that as much locally grown and healthy produce can be included in school meals. As part of the 'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' initiative, USDA has formed a Farm to School Tactical Team, which is charged with developing and fostering practical approaches to facilitate connections between schools and local producers. Recent appropriations actions will build on this effort with grants to encourage school and community gardens.

School wellness policies should be enhanced and additional support should be providing for training for school food service professionals, so that they have the skills to serve top-quality meals that are both healthful and appealing to their student customers. Our school food service professionals are on the front lines of our children's' health and nutrition and we need to provide them with the support to excel in their jobs.

Lastly, we must continue to advance the public trust by investing in school meal performance. Through technology and training, we can reduce error rates and resolve management challenges in ways that serve our school children and the general public.

Several weeks ago, through passage of the Agriculture Appropriations bill, Congress made an important first step toward accomplishing these goals. Thanks to the leadership of Chairman Lincoln and Senators Chambliss and Harkin, and Chairman George Miller, as well as Chairman Kohl and Chairwoman DeLauro on the appropriations side, we will be able to improve children's' access to meals during the summer, help enroll more children in the School Lunch Program and improve health and nutrition in child care settings. We view this as an important down payment on the priorities mentioned above.

The legislation, which was signed into law by the President several weeks ago, includes this series of high-priority goals:

- A series of Summer Demonstration Projects to develop and test methods of providing access to food for children in urban and rural areas during summer months when schools are not in session. This provision supports the Administration's efforts to take steps to end childhood hunger by 2015, a goal we can all support. (\$85 million)
- Direct Certification Grants to improve the rate of direct certification in States with the lowest rates of children directly certified for free school meals. (\$25 million)
- WIC Breastfeeding Performance Bonus payments to State agencies that excel in promoting breastfeeding – the medically-preferred feeding practice for most infants – through the WIC program. (\$5 million)

- National School Lunch Program Equipment funding, similar to that provided under the Recovery Act, to allow states to make additional equipment assistance grants, giving priority to schools serving a high percentage of free and reduced price meals. (\$25 million)
- Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Grants to State agencies administering the CACFP for the purpose of improving the health and nutrition of children in child care settings. (\$8 million)

Our priorities and many more will be debated by Congress in the near future as it considers legislation to modernize these programs. Just as teachers inspire and parents encourage our children we must ensure that healthy food is available to help these future generations grow and learn.

The President and I are committed to combating hunger and providing healthier foods to our nation's children, and I hope we'll have your support in these efforts.

Again, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you this morning to discuss the reauthorization of the USDA's Child Nutrition Programs and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.