



Testimony

Submitted to The Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate

Hearing

“Child Nutrition Reauthorization: Healthy Meals and Healthy Futures”

Thursday, March 25, 2021

106 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Statement of Mr. Carlos M. Rodriguez

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Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the invitation to attend today’s hearing. My name is Carlos Rodriguez. I have the privilege of serving as President and CEO for the Community FoodBank of New Jersey (CFBNJ), which provides food and access to other critical resources for 15 of New Jersey’s 21 counties. I’ve spent 15 years of my 25-year career in anti-hunger work, including at three food banks across two states. I am also someone with lived experience utilizing federal child nutrition programs, so I have seen firsthand how these programs not only fill empty bellies but also nourish a child’s success. Today, I am both honored and humbled to testify on behalf of more than a million food-insecure New Jersey neighbors, including approximately one in five New Jersey children.

In my testimony I will address the critical role federal afterschool and summer feeding programs play in addressing childhood hunger throughout the year, as well as the lessons we’ve learned through administering these programs in the current pandemic. While I will focus on these two federal programs, I also want to add my support for the importance and the significant impact of nutritious food and meal programs that assist families with children in child care and during school or pregnant women, infants and toddlers served through critical initiatives such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs (NSLP and SBP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and others. My intent is to share insights about the role Community FoodBank of New Jersey and other food banks play in addressing childhood hunger in

communities through innovative public-private partnerships as well as how the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) are key in those efforts.

I can think of no better way to illustrate the impact and importance of federal child nutrition programs than with the true story of Paige, a little girl who would likely lack adequate access to nutritious meals without them.

During a visit to one of CFBNJ's partner afterschool locations that operates both Kids Cafe (CACFP) and summer meals programs, this gregarious eight-year-old marched right up to our team, eager to talk all about her experience there. It was December 2019, not long before COVID, and she had been enjoying a well-balanced meal of an apple, carrots, milk, and a whole wheat turkey sandwich. She explained that she and her two siblings visited the site every day while their parents were at work.

"We like coming here because we don't get this kind of food at home," Paige said. "My favorite thing that they make with dinner is the salad. If I could have it every day, I would."

Paige skipped off from our conversation that day to go play basketball with her friends, a happy, healthy child nurtured by CACFP and the caring environment of her afterschool program.

Then COVID-19 hit. Though both of her parents work hard, making ends meet was a challenge for them even before the pandemic. Fortunately, this partner site started offering grab-and-go meals from CFBNJ during the pandemic, providing meals for 50 children per day since April, ensuring children like Paige and her siblings can still get the nutritious food they need to grow up healthy and reach their full potential.

Making real progress toward ending child food insecurity and ensuring opportunity for all of our nation's children will require investing new resources toward increasing access, particularly during times when children are out of school like summer. Incremental change is not enough and an investment in funding child nutrition programs is an investment in our children's health and education and a productive competitive future workforce that will pay dividends in years to come.

Background

The Community FoodBank of New Jersey started as a modest enterprise in the back of our founder Kathleen DiChiara's station wagon in downtown Newark in 1975, became an incorporated non-profit in 1982, and has grown to two warehouse facilities, the combined size of five football fields, that serve approximately 1,000 community partners in 15 of 21 New Jersey counties that are home to approximately 760,000 food-insecure residents.

Together, we provide a warm meal or food at home for our New Jersey neighbors struggling to make ends meet; help people through application assistance for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); reach communities with limited resources with mobile pantries; and encourage others to get involved. Since the start of the pandemic, we have provided enough nutritious food for 83 million meals, adapting our service models to large-scale distributions across 12 counties, distribution of fresh food boxes, emergency meal kits, and prepared frozen meals for seniors and homebound individuals. Our child nutrition programs alone have delivered 450,000 meals. We have provided 2,700 New Jersey residents with assistance applying for SNAP. We address hunger as a health issue by providing more fruits and vegetables, nutrition education, and medical screenings to inspire positive lifestyles. In fact, fresh produce has comprised 25% of all the food we have distributed since the start of the pandemic.

Community members from all walks of life engage in our mission through volunteerism, committing 30,000 hours in service to our mission – despite the challenges of the pandemic.

We are one of four Feeding America food banks who provide a broad array of hunger-relief services across New Jersey. We are also one of 200 members of the Feeding America national network who provide similar services through 60,000 food programs including food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, afterschool programs, summer feeding sites, and many other hunger-relief services.ⁱ Like the colleagues testifying here today, we work daily to address childhood hunger in our country. Most relevant to today’s hearing, for more than 14 years, CFBNJ has directly implemented two federal child nutrition programs as a sponsor: the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).

Food Insecurity and the Federal Child Nutrition Programs

Food insecurity in our state and, in fact, across our country was a significant concern even before the pandemic, with a staggering number of people and children affected, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1, Pre-Pandemic Food Insecurity (2018)ⁱⁱ

	New Jersey	United States
Food Insecurity	774,860	35,207,000
Child Food Insecurity	219,760	10,732,000

Sadly, in New Jersey, 1 in 9 children were experiencing food insecurity.ⁱⁱⁱ Nationally, the risks were also quite sobering, with 1 in 7 children unsure when they might eat again.^{iv} Though not always visible, childhood hunger remains a significant problem in the United States. Millions of families do not have the resources to purchase the food that they need. In most of these families, parents protect children from hunger. Though their children may not get the nutritional quality or variety that they need for proper health and development, parents will reduce their own portion sizes or skip meals to protect children from actual hunger pangs. The existence of food insecurity among children in a household should raise alarm bells, as it is often an indicator of a profound level of need in that home.

Fortunately, the United States has a robust and complementary set of federal child nutrition programs to protect children from hunger and promote improved nutrition and health. Since their implementation in the 1960s, federal child nutrition programs serving children outside of school hours complemented school meal programs established in the 1940s. Together, they have been successful in reducing the hunger and extreme malnutrition that we saw in the United States several decades ago.

For more than 40 years, CACFP and SFSP have been critical federal Child Nutrition programs that have helped bridge nutritional gaps experienced by hungry children. Prior to the pandemic, CACFP was providing snacks and suppers to nearly 30,000 New Jersey children during the school year, and SFSP was helping more than 100,000 children at the height of summer. Table 2 shows the scope of afterschool and summer meal program support from school districts, day cares, YMCAs, food banks, public libraries and so many other compassionate and dedicated organizations, staff members, and volunteers

Table 2, New Jersey CACFP and SFSP Scope^{v,vi}

	Sponsors	Sites	Average Daily Site Attendance	Snacks & Meals	Participation Rate, as a Percent of Students Receiving Free/Reduced Price School Lunch
CACFP (March 2019)	58	311	29,037	600,782	16
SFSP (July 2019)	133	1,438	101,381	3,191,937	26

Comparing this data, to National School Lunch Program data (NSLP) reveals how structural and administrative limitations, along with site availability and recipient constraints, may have been impacting participation rates and successes in both programs. CACFP, for example, only serves one-sixth of the low-income students served by NSLP; while SFSP boasts higher participation than CACFP, it still barely reaches more than one fourth of the low-income students participating in school lunch.

Child nutrition programs are only effective when they reach the children who need help. The data for New Jersey exemplify how frequently programs targeting children during out-of-school times, like SFSP and CACFP, fail to reach the majority of children in need of food assistance.

Nationwide, fewer than 3 million children received food assistance through a summer feeding program in the summer of 2019, before the pandemic upended operations and lives. That is less than 14 percent of the kids that rely on free or reduced-price school lunches during the school year. In fact, summer feeding provides the most striking access gap among the federal nutrition programs. While some families have access to summer feeding sites in their communities, the vast majority do not. The current summer feeding model requires children to consume meals at a designated feeding site. For reasons discussed below and laid bare during the pandemic, it can be difficult to operate a site-based model during the summer, so there are far fewer access points during the summer than during the school year.

Our nation could do much more to reduce child hunger and malnutrition simply by reaching more children during the times when they are not in school. The reauthorization of child nutrition programs provides the important opportunity to make good programs even better through policy updates that will improve access to quality child nutrition programs and ensure no child goes hungry.

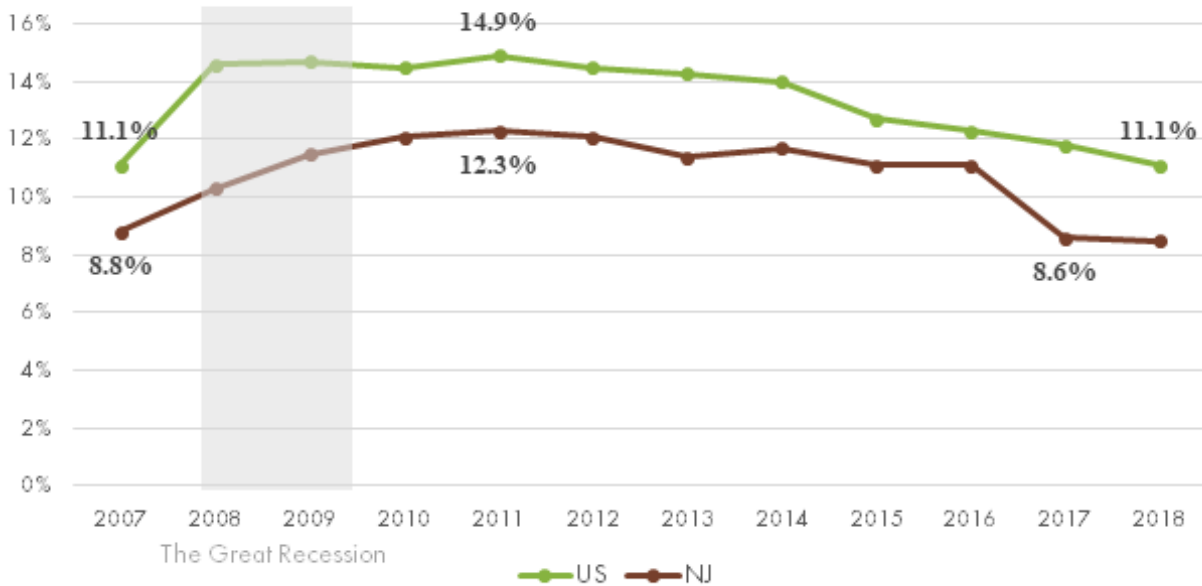
The Impact of COVID-19

In early 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) began to spread across the United States, and one of the results was an economic recession that ended years of declining rates of food insecurity – the lack of access to sufficient food because of limited financial resources. Many people who have been most impacted by the pandemic were food insecure or at risk of food insecurity before COVID-19, and are facing greater hardship since COVID-19. Significant racial disparities in food insecurity that existed before COVID-19 remain in the wake of the pandemic. Feeding America projects that 21% of Black individuals (1 in 5) may experience food insecurity in 2021, compared to 11% of white individuals (1 in 9).^{vii}

To promote social distancing and slow the spread of COVID-19, school closures started across the nation in mid-March. **In the wake of millions of students losing access to school meals, and an economic downturn, child hunger has soared in the United States.** Right now, more children than ever are going to bed with empty bellies. Due to COVID-19, Feeding America projects that 42 million people (1 in 8), including 13 million children (1 in 6), may experience food insecurity in 2021. In my home state, this includes more than 1 million New Jerseyans, with more than one third of them children. Feeding America estimates that 15 million children (1 in 5) may have experienced food insecurity in 2020. According to the Brookings [Institution](#), nearly 5 times as many single mothers with young children report their children don't have enough to eat compared to 2018.

Our all-too-recent experience with recovery from mass unemployment and economic dislocation during the Great Recession shows that food security issues can well outlast the period of economic crisis. Federal data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Census shown in the graph below demonstrate that household food insecurity peaked in 2011, two years after the Great Recession ended, and did not return to pre-recession levels until nearly ten years after it ended. **This may be a cautionary tale, but it is not an inevitability: a decade of food insecurity does not have to be the legacy of COVID-19 for our children.** The decisions this committee makes can prevent an extended food security crisis for children and families across the country. I urge you to take this as your charge.

In NJ and the US overall, food insecurity rates peaked two years after the end of the Great Recession. It took nearly a decade for rates to drop back to pre-recession levels.



The Food Bank Network's Response

Having served as a lifeline for those affected by 9/11, the Great Recession, and Superstorm Sandy, CFBNJ is no stranger to emergencies. COVID-19, however, required us to do more: together with our network of more than 1,000 partner feeding programs, we adjusted and ramped up our operations to give

out as much food as possible, advising our community partners on alternate distribution methods and personal protective equipment (PPE) use, while adapting temporarily to a 24-hour, three-shift system in our own warehouse.

These immediate and fundamental changes in how we operate and feed our communities were happening at food banks around the country. Our child feeding programs in particular needed major changes to adapt to the new reality. As schools initially closed and have continued to adjust their models, we have all been forced to operate in what is essentially a prolonged summer setting. In important ways, these changes were like a summer test that none of us wanted to take – the key logistical challenges we have faced in the summertime for decades were forced upon children across the country almost overnight. Recognizing these challenges, Congress and USDA acted swiftly to provide programmatic flexibilities to ensure children could be fed safely. Operational waivers allowed meals to be taken home for consumption, allowed multiple days' worth of meals, allowed any child in need of food to take a meal home no matter the relative poverty surrounding them – these have been necessary and welcome changes and have helped us ensure children have access to food.

The pandemic created enormous barriers to distributing food at schools. Federal and state waivers allowed school districts to implement grab-and-go meal distributions to children. Food banks across the country actively partnered with school districts to extend meal distribution to the families of the children served by the schools, which included prepackaged shelf-stable boxes, fresh produce boxes, Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) boxes, and family-sized meal boxes. If schools were not able to distribute meals to children or to deliver to children and their families, many food banks stepped up to fill gaps where possible, using innovative methods and combined program approaches.

Based on Feeding America data from food banks across the country, overall child nutrition meal distribution increased by 27%, or 43.4 million meals, in Federal Fiscal Year 2020. Congregate feeding programs that used the flexibilities afforded by federal and/or state waivers increased food distribution by 160% on average, compared to the 11% decrease in food distribution experienced by feeding programs that did not use or did not have access to federal or state program waivers.

The challenges of distributing meals to children during COVID mirrored the challenges service providers like us have long experienced in reaching children out of school time – the difference, during this pandemic, has been the program flexibilities that very proactively allow us to meet children where they are. As we continue reflecting on COVID-19, it is critical that we learn from this moment – that we look at programmatic changes with a new lens, incorporating the tools that worked into our toolkit of program options going forward. I look forward to COVID-19 restrictions ending, and not forcing changes upon us and how we work as program operators, and how individuals facing food insecurity must adapt. But I also look forward to our ability to design a better future for these programs based on decades of experience in addition to hard lessons learned during this past year of COVID-19.

Innovation and Policy Solutions

There are several policy changes Congress should make that would help reach more children during the summer, after school, and on weekends. We need a two-part strategy to reach children when they are out of school. First, we need to strengthen the site-based model by streamlining federal programs and making it easier for schools and community providers to expand the number of sites available to children. Second, we need to allow communities to adopt alternate program models to fill the gap where children cannot otherwise access a meal.

1. Strengthen the Site-Based Model

To strengthen the site-based model and reach more children when they are out of school, we recommend that community providers be able to operate one program year-round through SFSP, which would reduce red tape and streamline federal programs. To further encourage more sites to participate, the area eligibility requirement used by many sites should be changed to make it easier for sites to operate in communities with concentrations of low-income children. Bolstering the site-based summer meals model, particularly where educational and enrichment programming is offered, will be especially critical in the coming years, as children – disproportionately Black, Latinx, and low-income – impacted by learning disruptions and academic loss during COVID work to regain ground.

Provide a Seamless Year-Round Option for All Sponsors

Community FoodBank of New Jersey aims to reach children facing hunger – no matter the time of year. That is why we support afterschool programs with nutritious balanced meals and snacks during the school year, and serve some of those same institutions during the summer months. However, as a sponsor of these sites, the food bank must work with two separate federal programs –CACFP during the school year and SFSP during the summer, even though we are often serving the same sites, and the same kids.

The two programs – CACFP and SFSP – are similar but have inconsistent program requirements that can cause confusion for staff and volunteers operating the program. What’s more, the administrative requirements are often duplicative. Our food bank staff have to apply twice to the same state agency –once for afterschool and again in the summer – and also have to conduct training and monitoring, often for the same staff and same sites back-to-back. Our training for the summer food program occurs at the start of summer, and then we turn around and train the same staff again before October for the afterschool program. In a handful of states, CACFP and SFSP are administered by different state agencies, further increasing inefficiency and duplication.

Community-based organizations that operate federal nutrition programs that reach kids while they are out of school, like our food bank, and local YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, parks and recreation departments, or other charities, should have the ability to operate one program. This will allow them to focus on feeding hungry kids, not pushing paperwork. While schools have the ability to operate after school and summer feeding sites year-round through one program, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), community-based organizations must operate separate programs. While we know the streamlining of the two programs will assist our food bank to operate the sites more efficiently, we also know it will enable some of our partners who haven’t participated in both programs because of the paperwork burden to begin sponsoring and operating sites for children in their community.

These high administrative burdens, coupled with low reimbursement, can make sponsors shy away from participation, resulting in fewer feeding sites for kids. Likewise, these confusing regulations can make volunteers less likely to participate, which can be detrimental to those kids who might be unsupervised after school or during the summer if it were not for these feeding sites. After so many years, it’s time to align these two programs into one seamless year-around program for all sponsors and sites to administer.

Lower Area Eligibility Across Federal Summer Programs

Another way to expand the number of sites available to children would be to change the area eligibility criteria to allow more sites in low-income areas to operate. To qualify currently as an open site, a site must

meet the area eligibility test – located in an area where at least 50 percent of school children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals (at or below 185 percent of poverty). While sponsors keep track of the number of children and meals served each day, they do not collect individual income-eligibility data. This reduces the sponsors’ paperwork, increasing their likelihood of participation and allowing them to focus on site enrichment activities and nutritious meals.

However, the 50 percent threshold leaves out pockets of poverty in areas that do not meet these geographic criteria. It is also inconsistent with other federally funded summer programs, such as the 21st Century Community Learning Center programs and Title 1, which require at least 40 percent. Better aligning the eligibility between these federal programs would maintain the program’s focus on areas with above average numbers of low-income children while opening new access points for underserved families. In New Jersey, many of the areas that would become newly eligible are among the hardest to serve: rural food deserts with little access to other food sources. Area eligibility would ease food access issues in pockets of high need with few other resources.

During the pandemic, the USDA has taken the further step of allowing states to waive the area eligibility requirement related to “open site” meal service in the summer meals program. This waiver has allowed the Feeding America network to operate program sites/models in areas that were not being served, pre-COVID, as well as hard to reach areas like rural communities. The value of removing area eligibility also:

- Reaches families that haven’t participated or had the opportunity to participate in programming;
- Removes barriers to access;
- Increases opportunity to cross-collaborate with other program sponsors and organizations across communities and service areas;
- Increases opportunities for program partnerships at the local and state level;
- Increases sponsors’ overall ability to access, implement, and evaluate program needs in communities/areas that have never participated in programming or are newer to operation.

These benefits have certainly been reflected in our experience. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, we sponsored 20 new SFSP sites in the summer of 2020, including one in Woodbine, a small South Jersey community where approximately one in five families was living in poverty, pre-COVID, yet would not have met the area eligibility requirement. This is a concrete example of how the program flexibilities introduced during the pandemic helped create new access to needed meals for children.

2. Allow Alternate Program Models in Underserved and Hard-to-Reach Areas

A second recommendation to reduce the summer meal gap is to permit community organizations, such as Community FoodBank of New Jersey, to operate alternative program models to reach kids where they do not otherwise have access to a meal site. No two communities are the same, and therefore our partner organizations need a variety of tools and program models to effectively reach those in need. This includes proven strategies such as providing flexibility from the requirement that kids consume meals on-site, allowing communities to deliver or send meals home with children, and giving families a summer grocery card to supplement their household food budget. These models continue to be central to meet needs during COVID-19 and should be allowed to continue.

Where the current site-based model is available, it is great for children. These additional federal program models should complement the site-based model to effectively fill the gaps to ensure low-income children have access to the nutrition they need throughout the year. Allowing complementary program models and strong national standards will ensure that whether children live in New Jersey or New Mexico, Maine or Mississippi, they will have nutrition programs available throughout the year.

Relax the Congregate Feeding Requirement

The logistical challenges of delivering nutritious meals to children in the summer, when school is out of session, are significant. Modifying the congregate feeding rule would allow states like New Jersey the flexibility we need to serve nutritious summer meals to hungry children who live in hard-to-reach areas. Unfortunately, not all children live in communities that they or their families consider safe. Modifying the rule would also allow those children living in violence-prone neighborhoods to consume their summer meals in the security of their own homes rather than requiring them to be exposed to possible harm just to access a meal.

In March 2020, at the start of the pandemic, Congress enacted the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (subsequently extended by the Continuing Appropriations Act 2021), which gave the USDA the authority to issue nationwide waivers to ensure access to meals through the child nutrition programs as communities respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to issue waivers that increase cost. The USDA quickly announced key child nutrition waivers, which created new flexibilities for the program, and enabled the food bank network, schools, and all other providers to implement innovative service delivery models to ensure children have the nutrition they need to learn and grow during the disrupted school year as well as through the summer months. The flexibilities and waivers have also broken down the regulatory barriers and challenges that sponsors have encountered during previous summer nutrition operations – challenges further exacerbated in this pandemic.

In addition to allowing non-congregate feeding (i.e, off-site consumption of meals), other key flexibilities – such as allowing parents/guardians to pick up multiple meals at a time for their children, offering meal distribution outside ordinary meal times, and the area eligibility waiver noted in the previous recommendation – have enabled food banks and other SFSP sponsors to develop promising practices that meet children and families where they are and have been effective in addressing longtime barriers to access.

I can offer a concrete example, from my own experience, of how these flexibilities help remove barriers to access. Two of the new SFSP sites we sponsored this past summer were in Somers Point, a community where one in nine families was living in poverty, pre-COVID. Somers Point actually met the SFSP area eligibility requirements, yet had not been served by a single SFSP site the previous summer. While not a single child from Somers Point had received a SFSP meal in 2019, more than 3,200 meals were provided in that community during the summer of 2020, thanks to the additional program flexibilities introduced during the pandemic. The COVID waivers not only removed barriers to access in Somers Point, they helped create access where there had been none.

I am happy to share some additional highlights from my colleagues in the field.

Feedback from the Field:

- “Due to COVID-19, we saw a significant spike in attendance at our CACFP and then SFSP sites. This can also be attributed to the implementation of waivers and other flexibilities, including the ability to serve more than one meal at a time and allowing for drive-through meal service, which increased access to meals.” **Feeding San Diego (CA)**
- “We offered bundles meals for breakfast and lunch one day per week to provide meals for 5 days. Our participation was up due to partnerships with school districts, and we added groceries alongside congregate meals.” **Redwood Empire Food Bank (CA)**

- “The increase in meals served was significantly increased from last year due to COVID-19. We worked with existing program waivers to supply grab n’ go meals, more than one meal at a time, home deliveries, and site meals when possible. The sites we worked with were supportive of our programs and worked with us to supply a greater number of meals while adapting to programmatic changes. The waivers for serving more than one meal at a time, grab n’ go meals/non-congregate meals, deliveries, providing meals in areas that are below the 50% free/reduced lunch area eligibility threshold, and the waiver for on-site activities have been significantly beneficial for distributing meals to children in need during COVID-19. Having the waivers extended would have a positive impact on feeding children and helping families in our communities during the pandemic. We greatly appreciate Feeding America, grants and donations we have received, our volunteers, and local, state, and national assistance.” **Weld Food Bank (CO)**
- “Our Summer Feeding programs skyrocketed across the state thanks in part to the state receiving a waiver from USDA for the on-site meal consumption requirement which allowed our sites to provide once-per week distributions to families, making the program safely accessible to the unprecedented numbers of families seeking assistance. As well, the state allowed us to do virtual inspections of USDA sites via Facetime/Facebook Messenger Video, so we did not have to put staff into harm’s way travelling around the state. Without either of these, we likely would not have participated in the program. Families came one time per week and picked up an entire week’s supply of meals making the program safe to operate for our sites.” **Kansas Food Bank (KS)**
- During the pandemic we were able to partner with Washoe County School District to serve multi-day meal packs that children were allowed to take home with the waivers that the USDA approved which allowed FBNN to significantly increase the amount of meals we served each time a child came to get meals from one of our pick up locations.” **Food Bank of Northern Nevada (NV)**

Prior to COVID-19, privately-funded alternative models were being implemented by my food bank and others to fill gaps left by the federal nutrition programs. Our backpack program implemented in the rural communities of our service area, for example, was designed to meet this very need. Some of our sister food banks, such as Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee, have implemented mobile summer feeding programs to bring food to children with high need in hard to reach areas. In Tennessee, the food bank purchased four retired school buses, and each day in the summer they travel to communities that don’t have traditional summer feeding locations, park the bus, and bring kids on board to eat a nutritious meal. Across the country we have seen the positive impacts of these alternate models – whether a mobile bus or backpack program. However, they require huge investments from our community. When they are employed using private funds, they are often unsustainable and cannot meet the full need within the community. At our sister food bank in Eastern Michigan, to meet the needs of kids at some of their rural sites where they knew kids were not able to participate every day of the week, the food bank sent children home with a box of nutritious food for those days they were unable to attend the site. However, the program depends on private funds and the food bank has not been able to operate the program every year and is uncertain about the future sustainability given a lack of consistent funding.

In addition to flexibilities enabled during COVID-19, we were thankful when Congress appropriated funding to the USDA in 2009 to test similarly innovative program models for reaching kids during the summer months. Several of the demonstrations tested programs that have shown to be effective through smaller, privately-funded efforts as well as large scale COVID-19 interventions, such as providing kids

with multiple days of food or backpacks to serve them during the days when they are not able to reach a site. Other program models delivered meals to kids in rural areas where there were no sites that a child could travel to. In these models, implemented in Massachusetts, New York, and Delaware during this early pilot efforts and expanded greatly during COVID-19, children received meals close to or at their homes. By waiving the congregate requirement in hard to reach areas – such as rural communities, where there are no sites available, or where weather or safety challenges impact participation – providers can utilize all of our resources to reach those in need.

Modifying feeding requirements would allow more children to be served each day. Local municipalities know what can and cannot work in their own communities. Over the more than 14 years CFBNJ has been sponsoring summer meals sites, we came to know the recipe for success for a summer feeding site in our service area: it had to be within walking distance of participating children; have enough indoor space to keep meal times from being disrupted by summer thunderstorms or scorching heat; provide high-quality, nutritious meals; and offer engaging programming, which we recognized was as much a draw for participating children and families as the meals. This model is truly wonderful for the communities that have those resources and the families that can access them. The flexibilities introduced in the COVID waivers revealed just how exclusionary the program’s model had become. An approach rooted in equity cannot be “one size fits all.” We have seen how creating flexibilities for service delivery has created a more inclusive program that has expanded access, particularly in our rural and underserved communities. It’s time to update the way we feed kids in the summertime. States and communities need flexibility to meet rural, suburban and urban children’s needs. We need to use the most efficient and effective policies and reach hungry kids, no matter where they live.

Utilize Efficiency of a Summer Grocery Card

We are excited by another program model that was tested by the USDA to reach hungry kids in the summer through pilots starting in 2011 and tested more robustly in the Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) program authorized by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.

Since beginning in the summer of 2011, eight states and two Indian Tribal Organizations have participated in Summer EBT Demonstration projects to provide families with a grocery card pre-loaded with \$60 per month per child certified for free or reduced-price school meals.^{viii} This creative solution helps to offset an estimated incremental \$300 low-income households spend per month on groceries during the summer^{ix}, helping to partially relieve additional economic pressures on their already limited finances and assisting with the trade-offs between food, rent, medical bills and utilities these household face.

States administered the program through the EBT systems in either the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. The demonstration projects were extensively evaluated and in both rural and urban counties. The results were significant. In households that received funds to purchase groceries during the summer, very low child food security decreased by 33 percent. When compared to non-participants, kids also improved their nutrition outcomes. They consumed more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains, more dairy, and fewer sugar-sweetened beverages. What’s more, more than 80 percent of families in the typical demonstration area used the benefit, which is significantly larger than fewer than 20 percent of children who are able to access the current congregate summer meal program.^x

In March 2020, USDA enacted Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), a program that allows states to provide families with funds on an EBT card to make up for meals missed at school due to disruptions. In the spring of 2020, this allowed for approximately \$250 to \$450 per child in grocery benefits depending on the average number of days schools are closed in the state. Each state’s operation of P-EBT looks different when it comes to

overall program implementation (e.g. issuance of cards, partners involved in program implementation, e.g.). This program requires collaboration across different sectors across states, including the agencies administering the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – food stamps) and school meal programs, school districts, and other non-profit organizations including food banks.

Feeding America has been able to work in partnership with network members across states to note program involvement. While the involvement from network members looks differently – some food bank network members work closely with their state to help ensure families who are eligible for the program are signed up and participate, network members help to build awareness around the program by sharing flyers or other resources, and some network members have reported working closely with their local SNA offices to again build awareness/collaboration.

Below, are a few Pandemic EBT practices that have been captured from the network:

- **Arizona Food Bank Association:** The state submitted its P-EBT 2.0 plan to FNS on Jan. 11, and they expect to reach 631,000 kids with a max benefit of \$1,066 for 10 months. (In Round 1, they reached 787,000 kids with a max benefit of \$305 for 3 months.) We are collaborating with the Dept. of Ed. on materials for families, including an FAQ.
- **Georgia State Association:** In Georgia the Department of Family & Child Services issues the benefit, Department of Education has the Free & Reduce Price lunch data, and the Department of Childcare and Early Learning (DECAL) has the data on childcare centers, CACFP. Department of Education (DOE) does not have a database with names and addresses for all kids who have enrolled/eligible for Free/Reduced Price Lunch. They normally only collect that data one time per year at the end of the school year for a report to FNS.
- **Feeding Missouri:** The food bank has been informed that Missouri has just submitted its request to continue P-EBT to the USDA. I will be in a meeting this coming Friday where we hope to receive an update on the status from the MO Department of Social Services.
- **Cleveland Food Bank:** Benefits began going out in February 2021. Benefits will be issued every month- for two months prior (ex: January benefits will be loaded onto P-EBT or EBT cards in March, February benefits will be loaded onto cards in April, etc.). Ohio has an improved P-EBT call center, which families can call to troubleshoot issues with P-EBT benefits.

Though P-EBT was optional for states, and it was a heavy lift to operationalize, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands rose to the challenge — even while living with so many other pandemic-related challenges. Early evaluations found that the program substantially reduced food insecurity.^{xi} Additionally, our partners at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Food Research & Action Center conducted a review of P-EBT last year and captured critical learnings for how the program rapidly evolved and how it was able to reach so many children who had lost out on school meals.^{xii} The below bullets are based on key findings from that report outlining children who were able to be reached in the spring of 2020:

- ***Children in households already receiving SNAP benefits:*** Under federal law, all children in households receiving SNAP automatically qualify for free school meals. These children represent roughly half of P-EBT-eligible children nationwide and are the easiest for states to reach because they are known to the SNAP eligibility system and someone in their family already has an EBT card, since that is how SNAP benefits are delivered. All but two states (Louisiana and Wyoming) issued P-EBT benefits directly to these households without requiring any action by families, referred to as “direct issuance”, and all states but California added P-EBT benefits to the household’s SNAP EBT card.
- ***Children in households receiving other assistance.*** Thirty states were able to use information about children assisted by programs other than SNAP that also confer eligibility for free school

meals to issue P-EBT benefits directly, without requiring any action by families. These programs include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance (25 states), Medicaid (16 states), and foster care (15 states). Although these children are known to a state's eligibility system, their families typically do not have EBT cards, so states generally mailed new P-EBT cards to these households.

- ***Additional children receiving free or reduced-price school meals.*** This group includes children approved for free or reduced-price school meals because of their household income or because their school offers meals at no charge to all students (such as high-poverty schools operating under the Community Eligibility Provision). Most states did not have statewide lists with the data needed to issue benefits to these households, so they gathered information using one of the following approaches. Direct issuance: When states have sufficient information about eligible children, they can issue benefits directly to that household. Thirty-one states used information from state education agencies, school districts, and schools to mail a new P-EBT card directly to the family at the address on file with the school, without requesting additional information from the family. In these states, families did not have to take any action to request P-EBT benefits, unless there was missing or inaccurate data.
- ***Application (or other information collection):*** When states did not have enough information to directly issue benefits, they gathered it through an application process. Twenty-five states required at least some parents to apply for P-EBT or submit a data-collection form, which typically required the name of the head of the household, the current mailing address, the student's name, and the student's date of birth
- ***Newly eligible children.*** Thirty-four states reported extending P-EBT benefits to children in households that lost income due to the pandemic and thus became newly eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. At least 12 states added children whose families were enrolled in SNAP after the pandemic began. Likewise, 20 states provided P-EBT benefits to children whose family submitted a free or reduced-price meal application to their local school district, and at least one of those states (Oregon) set up a statewide school meal application for newly eligible families. But not all school districts routinely accepted and processed school meal applications, and not all districts explained to families that there was a reason to apply for free or reduced-price school meals when schools were closed.

New Jersey's P-EBT application to the USDA for the 2019-2020 school year extended the benefit to all children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. The state estimated that P-EBT could reach as many as 605,500 children with up to \$250.9 million in benefits. Anecdotally, local food pantries reported seeing fewer families with children requesting services during the period when P-EBT was being issued.

P-EBT has been extended for the current school year and adapted to meet the variety of school closure and hybrid approaches that are now in place and may develop over the school year. This is welcome news and a testament to the program's success as an option to reach children anytime they do not have access to school meals. In addition to the Summer EBT pilots, states' experience with P-EBT can become the starting point for an EBT-based program that complements the child nutrition programs by filling gaps during the summer, school breaks and any unanticipated school closures, such as those occurring during this pandemic and that occur during natural disasters. Having this system in place beyond the pandemic will ready us to respond quickly to crises when they occur.

Conclusion

Congress has an important opportunity in 2021 to improve the health of millions of our nation's children by passing a strong reauthorization bill that protects and strengthens the child nutrition programs. These successful, cost-effective federal nutrition programs play a critical role in helping children in low-income

families get access to child care, as well as to educational and enrichment activities, while improving their overall nutrition, health, development, and academic achievement.

Congress must enact a child nutrition reauthorization bill that strengthens program access and supports participation by underserved children, ensures nutrition quality, and simplifies program administration and operation. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the federal child nutrition programs, and a number of policy improvements that were made during COVID-19 should be implemented permanently by Congress. The reauthorization also should build on the critical gains — which improved access and nutrition — that were made in the last reauthorization.

The ultimate goal of our federal child nutrition programs should be to nourish the success of every child. Our own experience in New Jersey has shown that even under these challenging circumstances, the flexibilities provided by the COVID waivers can unlock enormous potential for these programs to yield gains in access, equity and reach, while reducing administrative burden. If the goal of these programs is to nourish the success of every child, then we urge this committee to take these lessons to heart as you consider improvements in the reauthorization of our federal child nutrition programs.

Summary of Recommendations

Strengthen the Site-Based Model

- Allow community providers to operate one program year-round through SFSP
- Lower the area eligibility threshold to serve more children

Allow Alternate Program Models in Underserved and Hard-to-Reach Areas

- Relax the Congregate Feeding Requirement
- Utilize Efficiency of a Summer Grocery Card

Making real progress toward ending child food insecurity and ensuring opportunity for all of our nation's children will require investing new resources toward increasing access, particularly during times when children are out of school like summer. Simply making small incremental change is not enough. An investment in funding through Child Nutrition Reauthorization with seamless year-around afterschool and summer programming is an investment in our children's health and education. An investment that will ensure a productive competitive future workforce that will pay dividends in years to come.

We believe that with more program options – when working together in a targeted, complementary way – we can close the summer meal gap. We call on Congress to reauthorize summer and afterschool feeding programs in a way that marries strong national program standards that ensure program integrity, nutrition quality, and food safety, with the flexibility that communities need to reach all children facing hunger.

On behalf of the Community FoodBank of New Jersey, Feeding America, our partner agencies and the people we serve, I thank you for your time and attention. And if you have not already, I encourage to visit your local food bank to see first-hand the great work they do during these challenging times. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Carlos Rodriguez
President & CEO
Community FoodBank of New Jersey

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- ⁱ Feeding America, *Hunger in America 2014*, National Report. August 2014. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/hunger-in-america>
- ⁱⁱ Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, E. Engelhard, M. Strayer & L. Lapinski. *Map the Meal Gap 2020: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2018*. Feeding America, 2020. <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, E. Engelhard, M. Strayer & L. Lapinski. *Map the Meal Gap 2020: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2018*. Feeding America, 2020. <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>
- ^{iv} Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, E. Engelhard, M. Strayer & L. Lapinski. *Map the Meal Gap 2020: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2018*. Feeding America, 2020. <http://map.feedingamerica.org/>
- ^v Parelo, Nancy. Food for Thought: The State of Afterschool Meals in New Jersey. Hunger Free New Jersey, September 2019. https://njfoodforthought.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/08/HFNJ_AfterschoolMeals_Report_2019.pdf
- ^{vi} Food for Thought: The State of Summer Meals in New Jersey, 2019. Hunger Free New Jersey, June 2020. https://hungerfreenj.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/06/NJSummerMealsRpt_2020.pdf
- ^{vii} Hake, M., E. Engelhard, A. Dewey, C. Gundersen (2021). The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020 & 2021, Update March 2021. Available from Feeding America: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/coronavirus-hunger-research>
- ^{viii} Participants in the Summer EBT Demonstration Projects include: Connecticut, Delaware, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, Oregon, Texas, Washington, Cherokee Nation, Chickasaw Nation
- ^{ix} Deloitte Consulting: *Summer Nutrition Program Social Impact Analysis: Summer Hunger is Too Expensive to Ignore*. Share Our Strength, No Kid Hungry June, 2015. https://www.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/NKH_MicroReport_SummerHunger.pdf
- ^x U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Summary Report, May 2016. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/sebtfinalreport.pdf>
- ^{xi} Lauren Bauer et al., “The Effect of Pandemic EBT on Measures of Food Hardship,” Hamilton Project, July 2020, https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/P-EBT_LO_7.30.pdf.
- ^{xii} For more information on the P-EBT research documentation project conducted by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and Food Research & Action Center, see www.cbpp.org/pebt and www.frac.org/pebt-study.