

Statement of the Food Research and Action Center
on the 2009 Reauthorization of the Child Nutrition and WIC Programs

USDA Listening Session
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I am Jim Weill, President of the Food Research and Action Center. The Food Research and Action Center – or FRAC as it is often known – is an organization that uses policy analysis, advocacy, public education, training and technical assistance to reduce poverty and end hunger in the United States. We appreciate this opportunity to offer recommendations on the upcoming Child Nutrition and WIC reauthorization.

We at FRAC believe that the reauthorization of the child nutrition programs and WIC must take advantage of the real opportunities that exist to improve access, meal quality and nutrition in the school breakfast and lunch, summer nutrition, afterschool and child and adult care food programs, and in WIC. These programs are profoundly important to millions of children and families in every part of this country – in terms of the large number of children they serve, in terms of their positive impact on children, and in terms of their great potential to do even more good. Because of their effects on children and families, they also have profound positive effects on communities and the nation.

A well-conceived and adequately financed reauthorization bill, focused on the right improvements, can do much to further reduce hunger and food insecurity, bolster family economic security, increase healthy eating, address the problem of childhood overweight and obesity, improve child nutrition and health, and enhance child development and school readiness. These opportunities exist because the child nutrition programs and WIC are fundamentally sound investments that already do much to accomplish these goals, but which, like even the best public programs, can always be updated and improved. Congress should expand, update and improve these programs because they can do much more good and do so cost-effectively. The following steps would qualitatively improve the programs, help them better achieve their goals, and give an important boost to America's children.

Working families need better access to nutritious food for their children in safe and nurturing environments in early childhood settings, after school and during the summer. The federal summer nutrition, school meals and child and adult care food programs can pay for local out-of-school time programs, child care providers and sponsors to offer meals and snacks. That nutrition is combined with supportive care, enriching early education, recreation and physical activity, and educational out-of-school time activities.

Oftentimes it is the food that brings hungry school-aged children to the door of the out-of-school time programs in the first place, boosting the numbers of children participating in these safe and supportive environments. Both afterschool and summer programs can improve children's health, school achievement, and safety, but they need federal nutrition funding to do so. As to preschoolers, the

Child and Adult Care Food Program provides essential nutrition and quality monitoring for them in a wide variety of child care and pre-K settings.

The federal nutrition programs for these settings currently provide important resources to feed children, but there are a number of ways to improve them so they better meet the needs of the children they are designed to serve. The following are key examples of strategies that are needed to serve both the goal of reducing food insecurity and the goal of promoting healthy eating:

- reduce the current “area eligibility” threshold, which is 50 percent, in order to serve more children in need of these programs, which now leave many low-income families without access (the 21st Century Community Learning Center area eligibility test is 40 percent; the Summer Food Service Program test used to be 33 percent);
- dramatically revise or eliminate the burdensome CACFP means test for children in family child care homes and thereby open up access for low-income working families – institution of the test has caused a substantial drop in family child care providers using CACFP to provide healthy nutrition to pre-schoolers;
- fund aggressive outreach efforts to allow more eligible children to participate;
- make available suppers for school-aged children in afterschool programs in low-income areas in the same way that snacks now are available (i.e., using the area eligibility test to reduce red tape and treat all children in a program alike), and in the same way that summer food is available. This would provide nutrition and supervision to the children as more parents work and commute long hours and programs run into the late afternoon and evening;
- make available suppers as a third meal for preschool children in child care for more than eight hours. (CACFP used to provide reimbursement for three meals, but currently reimburses only up to two meals and a snack.); and
- Develop strategies to help struggling community-based nutrition providers cope with the surges in food and energy prices.

Child nutrition programs can better support healthy eating habits which help to prevent childhood obesity and other nutrition-related diseases.

The child nutrition programs present opportunities for healthy and nutritious meals from birth through the teen years and for modeling lifelong eating habits.

Increasing the availability and consumption of fruits and vegetables and whole grains, and moving to lower fat dairy products, will be key to strengthen the programs’ role. Promoting healthier eating, preventing obesity and improving child (and adult) health through these programs can be achieved in a number of ways, including:

- improving meal quality by updating the child care and school nutrition meal patterns and the WIC food package at regular intervals to insure that they stay current with nutrition science and best practice;
- establishing rules for all foods sold in any setting in schools to assure that they contribute to the health and well-being of children;
- enhancing child nutrition program reimbursements in targeted ways in order to support all school and community-based providers, including summer, afterschool and child care providers and sponsors in their efforts to provide healthy meals and snacks; and
- improving participation rates in all of the programs in order to draw children into the healthier eating environments they provide.

More broadly accessible and healthier school nutrition is essential to nutrition, to health, to school improvement and to students' educational success. Numerous studies show hunger's detrimental effect on a child's ability to learn and thrive in school. Correspondingly, a huge range of studies find that children who have received WIC benefits enter school ready to learn and show better cognitive performance; and that school breakfast improves classroom behavior, test scores, grades and school attendance. We can meet more of the nation's education goals and do so more rapidly and cost-effectively if we insure that many more children benefit from key nutrition supports through:

- expansion of breakfast-for-all programs, especially in lower-income communities, where all children can receive a school breakfast in the cafeteria or (even better) in the classroom at no charge;
- start-up grants for school districts to cover initial, one-time equipment costs for breakfast programs; and
- making sure that school lunch and breakfast are as healthy as possible, served at reasonable times and with enough time for children to eat.

Less red tape and better co-ordination will let more hungry and needy children have access to the programs which provide them with the nutritious food they need. Unnecessary paperwork and administrative requirements and cost barriers for the working poor often keep potential afterschool, summer and child care providers and sponsors, schools and families from participating fully in the programs. The programs should be made administratively easier for sponsors to operate and for parents to access. Some important recommendations include:

- improving direct certification for school meals through state data matching systems;

- expanding pilot programs that eliminate or reduce paper applications and rely more on electronic applications and on alternative means (e.g., use of neighborhood or district-wide census data) to determine reimbursement for schools and other providers;
- streamlining program operations, increasing flexibility, and maximizing technology and innovation to allow sponsoring organizations and providers to operate most effectively;
- restoring advance funds for sponsors and child care centers to cover program costs upfront; and
- easing the administrative burdens on organizations that operate multiple child nutrition programs.

In 1946, Congress passed the National School Lunch Act as a "measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities." Since then Congress has wisely improved the child nutrition programs – initiating and strengthening WIC, school breakfast, summer food, child care food and afterschool nutrition – to better serve children and families and adjust to the many changes that have occurred in our economy, our families, our workplaces, our schools and our communities. The goals of the 2009 reauthorization of the child nutrition programs should equally be to make the programs more fully responsive to children's current nutrition, economic, health and educational needs and to safeguard and improve our children's health and well-being and thereby strengthen the nation.

We appreciate USDA's commitment to these programs and its work in holding these listening sessions, as well as soliciting public comments. We look forward to working in partnership with USDA and our local and state partners to make these recommendations a reality.