

The Food Research and Action Center

ENDING CHILDHOOD HUNGER BY 2015:

THE ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING THE PRESIDENT'S GOAL



In a nation as affluent as the United States, no child should go hungry, and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) applauds President Obama for making it a goal to end childhood hunger in this country by 2015. FRAC strongly believes the United States can and must reach this critical objective.

By 2015, the United States should be a place where all children have the adequate and nutritious food they need to build healthy bodies and strong minds. Achieving that goal will

require the nation to strengthen policies so that families and schools and other service providers that care for children are better able to provide food reliably and efficiently. Parents or other caregivers must be able to purchase and prepare adequate, healthy meals for the family. Schools, child care centers and homes, and afterschool and summer sites -- the places where children are learning, playing, developing and being cared for -- must meet children's nutritional needs when they are in those settings. And children should be treated with respect when help is given, and in ways that do not identify a child's socio-economic status or carry any stigma.

This will require both increasing nutrition and income support program participation under existing rules, and considerably strengthening the framework of programs. FRAC has identified seven essential strategies for ending childhood hunger by 2015, summarized here and explained in detail later in this paper:

- Restore economic growth and create jobs with better wages for lower-income workers.
- Raise the incomes of the lowest-income families.
- Strengthen the SNAP/Food Stamp Program.
- Strengthen the Child Nutrition Programs.
- Engage the entire federal government in ending childhood hunger.
- Work with states, localities and nonprofits to expand and improve participation in federal nutrition programs.
- Make sure all families have convenient access to reasonably priced, healthy food.

Last fall, the Obama campaign position paper titled "Tackling Domestic Hunger" noted that "Too many fellow citizens -- over 35.5 million Americans, including 12.6 million children -- face a constant struggle against hunger." It then stated: "Barack Obama will strengthen and expand nutrition programs and commit to ending childhood hunger by 2015." Since taking office, the President has reiterated this extraordinarily important commitment to end childhood hunger, as have White House

officials and the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. Both the President and First Lady Michelle Obama have spoken out on issues related to nutrition and hunger, underscoring the need for low-income Americans to have access to food that is both ample and healthy. Secretary Vilsack has reported that in his “job interview” before the President appointed him, President Obama said “what I want you to do first, the most important thing in this job, is to make sure that America’s kids are well fed.”

In short, the Obama Administration takes the 2015 commitment seriously, and it is incumbent on the rest of us – members of Congress, governors, other public officials, anti-hunger advocates, child advocates, business, labor, and service providers – to do so as well. Children will benefit enormously from having access to nutritious food – and so will the nation. Making sure children are well fed is an absolute necessity if America is to reach its health, education and economic goals¹.

It is a goal that the American people fully support. Polls have consistently found that the voters do not think the nation is doing enough to solve hunger, and they want government and political leaders to address the hunger problem and make sure that everyone in the U.S. has enough to eat². And the goal of ending hunger has strong bipartisan support, as it has had dating to the 1970s when Senators George McGovern and Robert Dole first tackled the nation’s hunger problem on a bipartisan basis.

SEVEN ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES

FRAC has identified seven essential strategies for efficiently reaching the goal of ending childhood hunger in the United States by 2015.

1) Restore economic growth and create jobs with better wages for lower-income workers

The recession has added millions of Americans to the ranks of those living in poverty and struggling with hunger, and the attention of policymakers has focused appropriately on restoring economic growth. While our nation certainly is affluent enough to end hunger even in the recession, it will not be practical or politically viable to implement key strategies to do so if the nation’s economy does not regain strength and begin growing again. As discussed below, President Obama and Congress have taken important first steps, especially in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, to help poor and hungry people grapple with the added hardships of the recession and to start a long-term

¹ The damage that poverty and food insecurity cause to children’s health, development and learning is great and is itself a drag on productivity growth and economic growth. See, e.g., “Reading, Writing and Hungry: The consequences of food insecurity on children, and on our nation’s economic success,” by the Food Research and Action Center and the Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program for the Partnership for America’s Economic Success, http://www.frac.org/pdf/reading_writing_hungry_report.pdf. A summary can be found at http://www.frac.org/pdf/reading_writing_hungry_summary.pdf.

² A compendium of several years of public opinion research – undertaken for FRAC by Peter D. Hart Associates and McLaughlin and Associates – can be found at www.frac.org/pdf/hungerpoll08_fullreport.pdf. A summary can be found at www.frac.org/pdf/hungerpoll08_summary.pdf.

effort to reduce poverty and hunger. However, dramatically reducing hunger and poverty while the economy declines is swimming against too strong a tide.

Moreover, while solving the childhood hunger problem is the paramount goal, how it is solved is extraordinarily important and will help determine the permanence of the solution. As we bolster the economy, the nation must strive to ensure that all Americans get a fair share of economic growth, which generally has not occurred over most of the last 30 years. Whenever possible, parents want jobs and good wages and benefits as the means to support their families. To do that will require fiscal and monetary policies that restore and sustain growth; robust private and public sector job creation and job training with new attention to making the economy work for all, including disadvantaged populations; full-time jobs at good wages that create family-supporting incomes; benefits and leave provisions that are consistent with family well-being; and strong child care supports.



Moving forward, moreover, it will not be enough, ethically or practically, just to feed children and leave parents in crisis.³ When parents themselves are struggling with hunger, it has negative effects on the development, behavior, health and learning of children. Food insecurity during pregnancy, for example, is associated with poor birth outcomes; and parental food insecurity – and the resulting stress, depression, poor health

and other outcomes for the parent – continue to adversely affect children throughout childhood.

2) Raise the incomes of the lowest-income families

President Obama's "Tackling Domestic Hunger" analysis made the important point that "The most effective way to eliminate childhood hunger and reduce hunger among adults is through a broad expansion of economic opportunity." To do that, he outlined a range of initiatives "to reduce and alleviate poverty, including providing permanent tax relief for working families, expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, raising the minimum wage, and providing affordable, accessible health insurance."

FRAC agrees with this approach. Nutrition programs alone can't carry the whole burden of government supports to end childhood hunger when employment falls short. There must be decent family incomes on which to build. If a full-time minimum wage job pays

³ The National Organizations Against Hunger coalition stated in 2008 in A Blueprint to End Hunger, "As a basic human right, all people should be able to purchase the food they need. Moving toward a future where everyone enjoys that right is a realistic, affordable and morally compelling goal for the United States."

only two-thirds of the poverty level, even substantially improved food stamp and school meals programs, while they can reduce suffering, won't end hunger.⁴ The nation must bolster incomes and lift the incomes of as many families as possible well above the poverty line. Key strategies to accomplish this, in addition to health reform, are to:

- **Make additional increases in the federal minimum wage.** Even after the July 2009 increase, the minimum wage remains well below levels in the 1960s and early 1970s on an inflation-adjusted basis.
- **Improve tax credits for working families.** We should retain and build on the improvements that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) made in the Earned Income Tax Credit and the refundable Child Tax Credit, and its creation of the refundable Making Work Pay Tax Credit. These steps in the ARRA are a solid boost to the incomes of low-income working families, but so far are only effective for tax years 2009 and 2010. They must be continued and improved.
- **Improve other supports.** Among other strategies, the nation needs to retain and build on unemployment insurance provisions in the ARRA, strengthen child support recovery, and improve the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF), including when TANF is reauthorized in 2010.

3) Strengthen the SNAP/Food Stamp Program

To reach the 2015 goal, it will be crucial to greatly strengthen the nation's nutrition programs. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP) -- the federal name for food stamps as of October 2008 -- is the nation's most important direct defense against hunger. It is the nutrition program that can do the most to eliminate childhood hunger, and do so by helping families use the normal commercial food outlets used by other Americans. The program is fundamentally strong, but needs some key reforms and improvements to carry its share of the weight in reaching the 2015 goal. In particular:

- **Update and improve benefit levels.** Benefit levels are too low to stave off hunger for a month, much less allow a family to purchase a healthy diet. The monthly allotment is predicated on a food plan (the "Thrifty Food Plan") which was developed during the Depression in the 1930s "as a restricted diet for emergency use." The allotment typically carries even the most careful of families only three-quarters or four-fifths of the way through the month. The amount of the federal government's own Low-Cost Food Budget -- the lowest of three government budgets for normal use -- is approximately 25 percent higher than the Thrifty Food Plan, and should be the basis for SNAP allotments. That Low-Cost Food Budget is generally in line with what low and moderate-income families report that they need to spend on food, as opposed to the lower amount a food stamp allotment would provide.

⁴ The full-time minimum wage currently equals about 72 percent of the poverty level for a family of three and 59 percent for a family of four. An increase in the minimum wage scheduled for July 24, 2009 will raise these levels to 79 and 66 percent respectively.

- **Adjust benefit amounts in a timely manner.** While the benefit allotment is adjusted for inflation each year, the increases come only after a time lag so the allotment reflects not current prices but the prices of the (already inadequate) Thrifty Food Plan from between four and 16 months earlier.
- **Expand eligibility and improve benefit computation rules.** Policymakers should also: extend the program to children and parents now excluded from benefits by arbitrary eligibility rules; fully allow SNAP benefits to increase when high housing costs consume more of a family's income (a provision that was cut back for families with children by 1996 legislation); reduce unnecessary red tape that deters participation; improve earnings disregards and other benefit computation rules; and otherwise improve access and responsiveness to the needs of families with children.

4) Strengthen the Child Nutrition Programs

The President's "Tackling Domestic Hunger" paper emphasizes also that the child nutrition programs (school lunch and breakfast; afterschool and summer food; WIC; child care food) are essential tools for ending childhood hunger. The paper correctly notes that these programs and SNAP do more than address hunger: "they reduce poverty, prevent obesity, strengthen schools and child care programs, and boost children's health, development and school achievement." They are among our nation's most important and cost-effective public interventions, but they must be bolstered in important ways as part of a campaign to eliminate childhood hunger. Here are some of the necessary steps:

- **Increase participation in the federal free and reduced price school meals programs, especially breakfast, which is severely underutilized.** Part of the answer is for schools, localities and states to work aggressively to enroll into the meals program the many eligible but not participating children (one way to do this is more effective automatic enrollment of SNAP-recipient children). Wherever possible, paperwork for parents should be reduced or eliminated. Red tape is also a problem for schools: paperwork for participating schools (and non profits like afterschool and summer programs) should be reduced so they need not file multiple applications to serve children good nutrition year-round. The federal government should also move to: provide more support to initiatives that offer lunch and breakfast free to all children in schools with substantial numbers of low-income children – this will reduce red tape and stigma and boost participation; support initiatives to serve breakfast in the classroom – an increasingly popular nutritional and educational strategy; and provide federal commodities (as well as cash reimbursements) for school breakfasts, as is now done with school lunches.
- **Expand access to nutrition in afterschool and summer programs.** Only 17 children receive lunch in the summer from the federal nutrition programs for every 100 low-income children who get lunch during the school year. One barrier is the difficulty for many afterschool and summer programs in meeting an "area eligibility test" for nutrition program reimbursement that is too strict (particularly after Congressional cutbacks). The government should make the eligibility requirement for such funding the same as in education and

afterschool programs like the Department of Education's Title 1 and 21st Century Community Learning Center programs. Start-up grants and transportation grants (especially for rural areas) also are essential. Afterschool programs should be reimbursed not just for snacks but for meals they serve to children when the programs operate into the late afternoon or evening, or on weekends or school holidays.

- **Expand nutrition programs for children in child care.** The federal Child and Adult Care Food Program should be adjusted to make far more low-income preschoolers in child care centers and family child care eligible for a day's worth of federally funded meals and snacks. This will require changes in the eligibility test (currently less than half of all child care facilities participate in CACFP); and a rollback of a shortsighted rule enacted by Congress limiting the number of meals for preschoolers to two a day no matter how many hours a day they are in care.
- **Improve WIC.** We should provide children in the WIC program the full fruit and vegetable allotment recommended by the Institute of Medicine, rather than the slightly smaller one adopted in 2008 with a reduction driven by budget considerations.
- **Improve meal quality.** The government must improve the quality of meals provided in child care settings, summer and afterschool, and schools; provide reimbursement rates and structures adequate to support healthy eating; improve the healthfulness of commodities donated to schools; and enforce the nutrition and safety standards already in effect, improve those standards, and apply them to all foods offered or sold in schools.

The child nutrition programs are up for reauthorization this year, and the Obama Administration has proposed adding \$1 billion annually to their funding. (In FY 2009 the programs together will spend more than \$20 billion.) FRAC is supporting a larger increase in order to take more of the steps needed to expand participation and improve nutrition, but an increase of \$1 billion would be a helpful first step, especially if well-targeted on a beginning set of changes that would ensure more low-income children are enrolled in nutrition programs and provide hungry children with more food when needed -- such as a third meal in child care, and suppers after school. But there will be considerably more work needed after reauthorization to make the programs robust enough to fully play their part in meeting the President's 2015 goal.

5) Engage the entire federal government in ending childhood hunger

All agencies that touch the lives of low-income children, families and communities must be engaged in the campaign to end childhood hunger, not just the Department of Agriculture. The Treasury Department can do more outreach to increase the utilization of important refundable tax credits for low-income working families. The Department of Education and the Department of Justice, which fund afterschool programs, can incorporate anti-hunger efforts into their program rules. They can, for example, encourage or require their grantees to participate in federal nutrition programs and thereby provide healthy food to hungry children in their care. The Department of Health

and Human Services can take similar steps with the tens of thousands of child care providers that receive its funds. This type of coordination could be facilitated by streamlined application and documentation processes. The Department of Defense should expand its program that gets healthy commodities into schools. The Corporation for National and Community Service should make ending childhood hunger a priority as it places volunteers and carries out its important domestic programs. In addition, many offices in the White House and the Executive Office of the President have significant expertise that could help identify and implement solutions to childhood hunger. They include the Office of Social Innovation, the Domestic Policy Council, the Office of Urban Affairs Policy, the Council on Women and Girls, and the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

6) Work with states, localities and nonprofits to expand and improve participation in federal nutrition programs

The federal income support and nutrition programs need to be strengthened, but the intermediaries for those programs also need to take better advantage of them. Today, the rate of participation in SNAP among eligible people ranges from about 50 percent in some states to more than 90 percent in others. The situation is similar with school feeding programs: in some states, only 33 low-income children get school breakfast for every 100 who get school lunch; in others, it is much higher.

Even in the best states, rates often aren't high enough, and low enrollment rates in most states contribute enormously to the hunger problem. They are due to a variety of factors. The differences in both official attitudes and results among the states are one reason it is so important to have even stronger federal programs with robust federal funding and clear national program rules: whether or not a child is hungry – and healthy and able to learn – shouldn't depend on an accident of birth or family mobility, where she is from or where she goes to child care or school.

Strengthening the national framework therefore is essential, but so is encouraging full use of federal programs and available federal funds:

- **Expand outreach and education.** The federal government, as well as state and local governments, foundations and other private-sector stakeholders, should increase outreach efforts for nutrition programs as they have done for child health insurance and the Earned Income Tax Credit. This should include expanding support for nonprofit advocacy groups, food banks and other direct service providers that struggle to improve federal nutrition program participation.
- **Restore support for the Community Food and Nutrition Program,** a federal initiative which for many years supported successful and cost-effective local outreach and advocacy but was defunded beginning in FY 2006.
- **Improve and expand performance bonuses.** Federal initiatives that reward states for excellent performance in such areas as reaching higher rates of SNAP-eligible families should be made more robust and extended to all nutrition programs.

- **Create incentives for participation in nutrition programs.** The federal government should find new ways to encourage or require schools, child care providers and out-of-school-time providers funded by government agencies to participate in the federal nutrition programs.

7) **Make sure all families have convenient access to reasonably priced, healthy food**



Many neighborhoods and towns across America lack decent-sized stores that sell a good variety of food, including fresh produce, at reasonable prices. Living in one of these “food deserts” makes it far harder, if not impossible, for a struggling low-income family to stave off hunger and stay healthy. They often must forgo healthy food or spend scarce resources traveling to food stores; pay more than average amounts for food; and get food of lesser nutritional quality.

Community gardens and school gardens, farmers’ markets and greencarts, and improving the offerings of corner stores can help combat this. But we must take steps to make decent grocery stores accessible to all Americans. We can build on a model successfully used in Pennsylvania and create a national stream of grants and loans for food markets in low-income, underserved areas – a national fresh food financing initiative. In addition, all grocery stores should participate in the food stamp and WIC programs in order to give low-income families better access to high-quality food.

MOVING FORWARD

Attaining the 2015 goal is certainly possible, but it will require using every day of the next six years to adopt and implement smart strategies. FRAC is eager to engage public officials, experts, other advocates and all who care about addressing hunger and poverty in this country in this important enterprise.

We welcome comments and thoughts on the strategies described above. And we welcome the commitment of all who want to engage in this extraordinarily important effort.

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