## COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR

### ROBERT C. “BOBBY” SCOTT, Virginia, Chairman

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EXAMINING THE POLICIES AND PRIORITIES OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE'S FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE

Wednesday, May 12, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CIVIL RIGHTS AND HUMAN SERVICES,
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 12:04 p.m., via Zoom, Hon. Suzanne Bonamici (Chairwoman of the Subcommittee) presiding.


Staff present: Ilana Brunner, General Counsel; Christian Haines, General Counsel; Alison Hard, Professional Staff; Sheila Havenner, Director of Information Technology; Eli Hovland, Policy Associate; Carrie Hughes, Director of Health and Human Services; Ariel Jona, Policy Associate; Max Moore, Staff Assistant; Mariah Mowbray, Clerk/Special Assistant to the Staff Director; Kayla Pennebecker, Staff Assistant; Veronique Pluviose, Staff Director; Banyon Vassar, Deputy Director of Information Technology; Cyrus Artz, Minority Staff Director; Courtney Butcher, Minority Director of Member Services and Coalitions; Amy Raaf Jones, Minority Director of Education and Human Resources Policy; Hannah Matesic, Minority Director of Operations; Chance Russell, Minority Professional Staff Member; and Mandy Schaumburg, Minority Chief Counsel and Deputy Director of Education Policy.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. The Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services will come to order.

Welcome, everyone. I note that a quorum is present. The Subcommittee is meeting today to hear testimony on examining the policies and priorities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service.

This is an entirely remote hearing. All microphones will be kept muted as a general rule to avoid unnecessary background noise. Members and witnesses will be responsible for unmuting themselves when they are recognized to speak or when they wish to seek recognition.

I also ask that members please identify themselves before they speak. Members should keep their cameras on while in the proceedings. Members shall be considered present in the proceeding
when they are visible on camera. And they shall be considered not present when they are not visible on camera. The only exception to this is if they are experiencing technical difficulty and inform Committee staff of such difficulties.

If any Member experiences technical difficulties during the hearing, you should stay connected on the platform, make sure you are muted, and use your phone to immediately call the Committee’s IT director, whose number was provided in advance.

Should the Chair experience technical difficulty or need to step away to vote on the floor, Mrs. Hayes, or another majority Member, is hereby authorized to assume the gavel in the Chair’s absence.

This is an entirely remote hearing and as such the Committee’s hearing room is officially closed. Members who choose to sit with their individual devices in the hearing room must wear headphones to avoid feedback echoes and distortion resulting from more than one person on the software platform sitting in the same room.

Members are also expected to adhere to social distancing and safe health guidelines, including the use of masks, hand sanitizer, and wiping down their areas both before and after they are present in the hearing room.

To ensure that the Committee’s five-minute rule is adhered to, staff will be keeping track of the time using the Committee’s field timer which appears in its own thumbnail picture and will be named 001 timer. There will be no one-minute warning. The field timer will show a blinking light. When time is up, members and witnesses are asked to wrap up promptly when their time has expired.

Although a roll call is not necessary to establish a quorum in an official proceeding conducted remotely or with participation, the Committee has made it a practice that whenever there is an official proceeding for remote participation for the Clerk to call the roll to help make clear who is present at the proceeding. Members should say their name before announcing they are present. This helps the Clerk and also helps those watching the platform on the live-stream who may experience a few seconds delay.

So at this time, I ask the Clerk to call the roll.

The Clerk. Mrs. Bonamici?
Chairwoman Bonamici. Chair Bonamici is present.
The Clerk. Ms. Adams?
Ms. Adams. Adams is present.
The Clerk. Mrs. Hayes?
Mrs. Hayes. Present.
The Clerk. Ms. Leger Fernández?
Ms. Leger Fernández. Leger Fernández is present.
The Clerk. Mr. Mrvan?
Mr. Mrvan. Frank Mrvan is present.
The Clerk. Mr. Bowman?
[No response]
The Clerk. Mr. Mfume?
[No response]
The Clerk. Mr. Scott?
Mr. Scott. Present.
The Clerk. Ranking Member Fulcher?
Mr. Fulcher. Fulcher is present.
The CLERK. Mr. Thompson?
[No response]
The CLERK. Mrs. McClain?
[No response]
The CLERK. Mrs. Spartz?
[No response]
The CLERK. Mr. Fitzgerald?
Mr. FITZGERALD. Here.
The CLERK. Mrs. Foxx?
Ms. FOXX. Here.
The CLERK. Chair Bonamici, that concludes roll call.
Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you.
Pursuant to Committee Rule 8(c) we are going to do opening statements, which are limited to the Chair and Ranking Member. This allows us to hear from our witness sooner and provides all members with adequate time to ask questions.

I recognize myself now for the purpose of making an opening statement. I want to start by thanking the Committee and personnel staff for their work on this Subcommittee hearing. We are holding this hearing today to learn about and discuss the Biden administration’s priorities for Federal child nutrition programs and the steps we should take to prevent children and families from going hungry during the pandemic and beyond. I want to thank Deputy Under Secretary Dean for being with us today.

The COVID–19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented number of children across the country to go hungry. Widespread school closures, combined with the economic crisis created a nightmare scenario in which hunger among children and families surged to unprecedented levels.

Even before the pandemic, too many children did not have access to healthy food. In 2018, nearly one in every seven households with children struggled to put enough food on the table. Unfortunately just weeks into the pandemic, more than one in every three households with children, and nearly half of all mothers with young children struggled with food insecurity.

By mid-July, as many as 17 million children were not getting enough to eat because their families could not afford it. I will say that again, less than a year ago, nearly 17 million children were not getting enough to eat. This crisis has been far worse for the families, many of them families of color who were already food insecure when the pandemic started. During the early stages of the pandemic, both Black and Latinx families experienced food insecurity at twice the rate of White families. These numbers should alarm all of us. Children who go hungry are far more vulnerable to chronic health challenges and without access to healthy food children struggle to build the foundation they need to learn, grow, and lead a fulfilling life.

Last year, Congress acted swiftly to expand access to nutrition assistance as schools across the country closed. One of the first relief packages, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act gave the USDA critical flexibility to allow schools and community partners to deliver meals to families and offer free meals to all children through the Summer Food Service Program.
Families First also included bipartisan legislation I led to eliminate other barriers to providing nutrition assistance. The bill also created the pandemic EBT program or P–EBT so low-income families who could not physically get to school meal sites could still receive funding to help feed their children.

I have visited with the dedicated staff at Aloha-Huber Park Elementary School and Hayhurst elementary school in Northwest Oregon. I spoke with the administrators. I spoke with the staff and the families about how these programs helped meet the needs of students and families. These investments have made a significant difference for families in Oregon and across the country.

Research indicates that P–EBT has lifted as many as 3.9 million children out of hunger. And recent reporting indicates that the share of Americans struggling with hunger is now at its lowest level since the pandemic started. Despite our progress, we know that too many children are still going to bed hungry. But the clear lesson from our successful efforts to bolster nutrition assistance programs is that when we provide people in need with relief, they use those resources to feed their families.

Fortunately, the American Jobs Plan includes important investments in school kitchens and the American Families Plan would invest $33 billion in our Federal child nutrition programs. We should swiftly advance these bills.

The American Families Plan also makes permanent and nationwide the summer EBT program, which already provides the assistance to families during the summer months. This program will help feed children across the country at a time when they are not getting healthy school meals.

The package also expands the popular Community Eligibility Provision or CEP. This expansion would feed roughly 9.3 million more children by making them eligible for preschool meals.

Moving forward, the Committee must also update the underlying laws that authorize our Federal child nutrition programs. They have been expired since 2015. The last child nutrition reauthorization, which Congress passed in 2010, with bipartisan support, dramatically expanded access to child nutrition programs. We should work together again to renew these critical laws. This hearing is an opportunity to examine these steps with Deputy Under Secretary Dean and to consider the future of child nutrition as we recover from the pandemic. How will our five or 10-year outlook change if we confront the child hunger crisis now?

I look forward to discussing these issues and the work we have ahead to make sure that all children in this country can access the healthy foods they need to thrive.

Thank you again to Deputy Under Secretary Dean for being with us today.

And I now want to turn to Ranking Member Fulcher to make an opening statement.

[The prepared statement of Chairwoman Bonamici follows:]

STATEMENT OF HON. SUZANNE BONAMICI, CHAIRWOMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON CIVIL RIGHTS AND HUMAN SERVICES

We are holding this hearing, today, to learn about and discuss the Biden administration’s priorities for Federal child nutrition programs and the steps we should
The COVID–19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented number of children across the country to go hungry. Widespread school closures combined with the economic crisis created a nightmare scenario in which hunger among children and families surged to unprecedented levels.

Even before the pandemic, too many children did not have access to healthy food. In 2018, nearly 1 in every 7 households with children struggled to put enough food on the table.

Unfortunately, just weeks into the pandemic, more than 1 in every 3 households with children and nearly half of all mothers with young children struggled with food insecurity.

By mid-July, as many as 17 million children were not getting enough to eat because their families could not afford it. I will say that again: nearly 17 million children were not getting enough to eat.

This crisis has been far worse for the families—many of them families of color—who were already food insecure when the pandemic started. During the early stages of the pandemic, both Black and Latinx families experienced food insecurity at twice the rate of White families.

These numbers should alarm all of us. Children who go hungry are far more vulnerable to chronic health challenges. And, without access to healthy food, children struggle to build the foundation they need to learn, grow, and lead a fulfilling life.

Last year, Congress acted swiftly to expand access to nutrition assistance as schools across the country closed.

One of the first relief packages—the Families First Coronavirus Response Act—gave the USDA critical flexibility to allow schools and community partners to deliver meals to families and offer free meals to all children through the Summer Food Service Program.

Families First also included bipartisan legislation I led to eliminate other barriers to providing nutrition assistance.

The bill also created the Pandemic EBT program, or P–EBT, so that low-income families, who could not physically get to school meal sites, could still receive funding to help feed their children.

I have visited with the dedicated staff at Aloha-Huber Park Elementary School and Hayhurst Elementary School in northwest Oregon. I spoke with the administrators. I spoke with the staff and the families about how these programs help meet the needs of students and families.

These investments have made a significant difference for families in Oregon and across the country. Research indicates that P–EBT has lifted as many as 3.9 million children out of hunger. And recent reporting indicates that the share of Americans struggling with hunger is now at its lowest level since the pandemic started.

Despite our progress, we know too many children are still going to bed hungry. But the clear lesson from our successful efforts to bolster nutrition assistance programs is that, when we provide people in need with relief, they use those resources to feed their families.

Fortunately, the American Jobs Plan includes important investments in school kitchens and the American Families Plan would invest $43 billion in our Federal child nutrition programs.

We should swiftly advance these bills.

The American Families Plan also makes permanent and nationwide the Summer EBT program, which already provides food assistance to some families during the summer months. This program will feed children across the country at a time when they are not getting healthy school meals.

The package also expands the popular Community Eligibility Provision, or CEP. This expansion would feed roughly 9.3 million more children by making them eligible for free school meals.

Moving forward, the Committee must also update the underlying laws that authorize our Federal child nutrition programs. They have been expired since 2015. The last child nutrition reauthorization, which Congress passed in 2010 with bipartisan support, dramatically expanded access to child nutrition programs. We should work together again to renew these critical laws.

This hearing is an opportunity to examine these steps with Deputy Under Secretary Dean and consider the future of child nutrition as we recover from the pandemic. How will our 5 or 10-year outlook change if we confront the child hunger crisis now?

I look forward to discussing these questions and the work we have ahead to make sure that all children in this country can access the healthy food they need to thrive.
Mr. Fulcher. Thank you, Madam Chair.

School meal program is one of the most important programs this Committee oversees. If students are hungry, they don’t learn. If they don’t learn, they don’t succeed in school. This impacts their prospects for a successful careers as adults. As I dig into this issue and hear more from my constituents on these programs, the best thing we can do is ensure this program works up and down the pipeline for those it is intended to serve.

When I say up and down the pipeline, I mean from production to consumption. Our Nation’s parents, farmers, ranchers, food producers, school districts, and school nutrition experts all play a critical role in the success of these programs. It is our job as elected officials to make sure the program aligns with what parents approve of and what farmers can produce to ensure we are able to by healthy, safe, and tasty food for students, and maintain requirements that are easily implemented in real school settings. If the standards are unattainable or overly complicated, the program will fail.

Nutrition officials from school districts around my State tell me one of the challenges they face while striving to put together nutritional, enjoyable choices for students is following the unclear, complicated Federal rules. To that point, let me quickly discuss the sodium targets in the current regulations. I will chalk this up as a noble goal that doesn’t fairly account for the reality on the ground. Under target two of the sodium requirements, grades K through 5 can have no more than 935 milligrams of sodium for lunch. If target three is enacted, sodium would be reduced to 640 milligrams. The American Heart Association released a sample menu of what further reducing the sodium might look like. Not surprising, the meals become far less appealing. To meet its target three sodium requirements, schools must eliminate the cheese from a cheeseburger, nix the pickles, and trade the potatoes for carrots. Does a plain hamburger patty with no condiments, no bun, and a side of carrots sound enticing to any of us, much less a school age child? Hardly.

Pushing for standards that don’t meet the reality on the ground will accomplish nothing because kids simply won’t eat the food. While schools have done an unbelievable job of working to implement the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act Standards since they went into effect, serving more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and less fat, calories, and sodium than ever before, the final sodium targets are unworkable given the other requirements they must meet when serving meals. One cannot cram idealism into lunch programs and pretend the problem is solved.

The so-called American Families Plan includes a vague program proposal that gives $1 billion to groups that push unworkable school meal standards. Before we create a new expensive program that could so confuse and burden schools, we should assess our existing programs, look at how they can be adopted to meet their intended goals.

One issue that deserves a closer look is nutrition education. How can we support local schools as they work with families to promote better nutrition? For example, how can we utilize programs like Team Nutrition, farm to school, and others to spark student inter-
est to help them take what they learned about food production, food business, and food preparation and share it at home? What kind of partnerships with grocers, farmers, and others can we look at to close the circle to help support healthy eating at home? These are questions we should consider as we thoughtfully reauthorize this program.

As we look toward reauthorization, Congress must understand what the school meal program will look like in the coming school years with the changes that come from the new COVID and health related issues such as a meal service or food preparation.

I am glad to see the Secretary provided some certainty for schools in the upcoming school and school year as they reopen to determine how to serve meals to students. However, if we limit our reauthorization efforts to the status quo, we hinder the ability of schools to provide healthy, tasty meals to students.

There are many more programs I could touch on today, but this is just the beginning of the reauthorization process. And I appreciate Deputy Under Secretary for joining. I would be remiss if I did not mention it is unfortunate that this is not a full Committee hearing, as I think a reauthorization such as this deserves the full Committee’s attention. Nonetheless, I look forward to hearing your testimony.

Madam Chair, I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Fulcher follows:]

STATEMENT OF HON. RUSS FULCHER, RANKING MEMBER, SUBCOMMITTEE ON CIVIL RIGHTS AND HUMAN SERVICES

The school meal program is one of the most important programs this Committee oversees. If students are hungry, they don’t learn. If they don’t learn they don’t succeed in school. This impacts their prospects for a successful career as adults. As I dig into this issue and hear more from my constituents on these programs, the best thing we can do is ensure this program works up and down the pipeline for those it’s intended to serve.

When I say up and down the pipeline, I mean from production to consumption. Our nation’s parents, farmers, ranchers, food producers, school districts, and school nutrition experts all play a critical role in the success of these programs. It is our job as elected officials to make sure the program aligns with what parents approve of and what farmers can produce, to ensure we are able to buy healthy, safe, and tasty food for students, and maintain requirements that are easily implemented in real school settings. If the standards are unattainable or overly complicated the program will fail. Nutrition officials from school districts around my State tell me one of the challenges they face while striving to put together nutritional and enjoyable choices for students is following the unclear, complicated Federal rules.

To that point, let me quickly discuss the sodium targets in the current regulations. I’ll chalk this up to a noble goal that doesn’t thoroughly account for the reality on the ground. Under Target Two of the sodium requirements, grades K–5 can have no more than 935 mg of sodium per lunch. If Target Three is enacted, sodium would be reduced to 640 mg. The American Heart Association released a sample menu of what further reducing the sodium might look like. Not surprising, the meals become far less appealing. To meet Target Three sodium requirements, schools must eliminate the cheese from a cheeseburger, nix the pickles, and trade the potatoes for carrots. Does a plain hamburger patty with no condiments, no bun, and a side of carrots sound enticing to any of us, much less a school-age child? Hardly.

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The so-called ‘American Families Plan’ includes a vague program proposal that gives $1 billion to groups that push unworkable school meal standards. Before we create a new, expensive program that could sow confusion that burdens schools, we should assess our existing programs and look at how they can be adapted to meet their intended goals.

One issue that deserves a closer look is nutrition education. How can we support local schools as they work with families to promote better nutrition? For example, how can we utilize programs like Team Nutrition, Farm to School, and others to spark student interest to help them take what they learn about food production, food business, and food preparation and share it at home? What kind of partnerships with grocers, farmers, and others can we look at to close the circle to help support healthy eating at home? These are the questions we should consider as we thoughtfully reauthorize this program.

As we look toward reauthorization, Congress must understand what the school meal program will look like in the coming school years with the changes that come from new COVID and health-related issues, such as meal service or food preparation. I am glad to see the Secretary provided some certainty for schools in the upcoming summer and school year as they reopen and determine how to serve meals to students. However, if we limit our reauthorization efforts to the status quo, we hinder the ability of schools to provide healthy, tasty meals to students.

There are many more programs I could touch on today, but this is just the beginning of the reauthorization process and I appreciate the Deputy Under Secretary for joining us. I would be remiss if I did not mention it is unfortunate that this is not a full committee hearing as I think a reauthorization such as this deserves the full committee’s attention. Nonetheless, I look forward to hearing her testimony.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you, Ranking Member Fulcher.

Without objection, all other Member who wish to insert written statements into the record may do so by submitting them to the Committee Clerk electronically in Microsoft Word format by 5 p.m. on May 26, 2021.

I will now introduce the witness. Stacy Dean was appointed by President Biden to serve as the deputy undersecretary for USDA’s Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services where she will work to advance the President’s agenda on increasing nutrition assistance for struggling families and individuals as well as tackling systemic racism and barriers for opportunity that have denied so many the chance to get ahead.

Prior to joining President Biden’s team at USDA, Dean served as the vice president for food assistance policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, CBPP. She directed CBPP’s food assistance team which published frequent reports on how Federal nutrition programs affect families and communities and developed policies to improve them. We appreciate the witness for participating today and look forward to your testimony.

Let me remind you that we have read your written statement and it will appear in full in the hearing record. Pursuant to Committee Rule 8(b) and Committee practice you are asked to limit your oral presentation to a five-minute summary of your written statement.

Before you begin your testimony, please remember to unmute your microphone. During your testimony, staff will be keeping track of time and a light will blink when time is up. Please be attentive to the time. And wrap up when your time is over and mute your microphone.

And as I explained before the hearing began, I am going to be a little lenient with Deputy Under Secretary Dean in terms of timing as she is the only witness today. But I will be pretty strict
about the five minutes just so that we can get through everybody's questions.

If you experience any technical difficulties during your testimony or later in the hearing, you should stay connected on the platform. Make sure you are muted and use your phone to call the Committee's IT department at the number provided in advance.

We will let the witness make the presentation before we move to Member questions. When answering a question, please remember to unmute your microphone. And the witness is aware of her responsibility to provide accurate information to the Subcommittee. And therefore, we will proceed with her testimony.

And I now recognize Deputy Under Secretary Dean.

STATEMENT OF HON. STACY DEAN, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR FOOD, NUTRITION, AND CONSUMER SERVICES, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. Dean. Thank you, Madam Chair, Mr. Ranking Member, and Subcommittee members. I am Stacy Dean, USDA's deputy undersecretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services. And I really appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about USDA's child nutrition and WIC programs today.

I also want to begin by acknowledging what a harrowing year it has been for families with children. At the peak last December, nearly one in seven households and more than one in six households with children reported not having enough to eat. Fortunately, the collective efforts of Congress and the administration, including the American Rescue Plan, have delivered help which has brought meaningful reductions in reported food insecurity.

But even the latest reports show that about one in nine households with children reported food hardship. With rates more than twice as high among Black and Hispanic households as compared to White households. It is imperative that we work together to continue to reduce food hardship and improve nutrition security. And in that vein, I would like to share a few of our key priorities.

First, we are proposing to make nationwide summer EBT permanent. Too many children face the summer hunger gap, but we know how to solve this problem. The results from our summer EBT pilot study shows that providing low-income families with resources to purchase nutritious food during the summer improves children’s food insecurity and diet quality.

I applaud your foresight for extending P–EBT into the summer during the months of the pandemic. For the first time, children eligible for free and reduced priced meals nationwide will receive EBT cards in the summer to help address the summer hunger problems.

But summer hunger problem won’t disappear when the pandemic ends. That is why the family plan invests over $25 billion in a permanent nationwide summer EBT, providing $75 per low-income child per month for food. This is an evidence-based approach that would bring forward and cement this effective anti-hunger policy.

Second, we are proposing to expand the reach of the school meal environment in high need schools. The community eligibility provision allows high poverty schools to offer all meals at no charge to their students. This increases student participation in the program
and allows schools to focus on serving healthy nutritious meals instead of paperwork.

The successful option was before the pandemic in over 30,000 schools with nearly 15 million children. The families plan would allow more high poverty schools into the option, this would focus on elementary schools. It would also expand direct enrollment into school meals for children already participating in Medicaid and SSI, easing paperwork for parents that have already taken pains to prove their children’s income eligibility.

Together, this $17 billion investment would enable an additional 20,000 schools in high poverty areas that serve more than 9 million children to begin providing all meals free of charge.

Third, we will continue to improve nutrition security through the child nutrition and WIC programs. Today, one in five American children are obese, increasing their risk of adult obesity and nutrition related health conditions, as well as potential financial burdens on our healthcare system.

Evidence shows that strong nutrition standards make an important difference. WIC research shows not only a powerful impact on first outcomes, but also that the updated food package standards helped to improve weight status in young children.

Now some controversy around the implementation of some school meal standards has somewhat explored the huge strides in making meals healthier over the past decade. A USDA study found that under the new standards school meals include more vegetables, whole grains, and dairy, and less refined grains and empty calories than before. With improvements experienced across racial and socioeconomic groups, which is great news for our children’s health.

School meals are the healthiest eating environment in the country and that is the success we should go on. We will continue these gains by setting and maintaining strong evidence-based standards, but we will pair them with realistic and achievable timelines for reaching them, and with the support schools need to serve nutritious meals that kids enjoy.

The families plan also includes $1 billion to help schools expand healthy offerings beyond their required standards and to test and evaluate strategies for encouraging healthy lifestyles. This would support local innovation to enhance school food environments.

Fourth, we will increase access to WIC with the goal of improving maternal and child health across racial and ethnic lines. The share of eligible families receiving WIC student benefits has declined to only about 50 percent. We will invest the $390 million Congress provided through the rescue plan in robust outreach to reach more eligible, as well as grants to support efforts to improve WIC service through equity and reduce health disparities.

And last, let me flag that we are very aware that the Committee will be working on the President’s proposal for historic investments in childcare for working families. We hope to work with you on how these proposals can leverage our highly successful Child and Adult Care Food Program to reach new childcare providers.

This nutrition program supports high quality care by providing nutritious meals to our youngest children. So of course the list I have just provided doesn’t cover all of the advancements that we
hope to make and that I expect you will be considering. So I look forward to our conversation today and our ongoing work together. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Dean follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF STACY DEAN

Statement of Stacy Dean
Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services
United States Department of Agriculture
Before the Subcommitte on Civil Rights and Human Services
Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives
May 12, 2021

Thank you Chairwoman Bonamici, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee for the invitation to join you today to discuss the policies and priorities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service. I am Stacy Dean, the Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) at USDA. In this role I am responsible for administering America’s nutrition assistance programs, which ensure every American has access to the food they need, even during difficult times. I want to thank you for your commitment to these programs and to America’s children.

I know that this Subcommittee is keenly aware of the value of the Child Nutrition programs – including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) – and of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (FMNP). They are highly effective at connecting moms, babies, and children with nutritious food and promoting nutrition to support their health, growth, and development. These strategies are critically important because a poor diet jeopardizes a child’s ability to learn and succeed in school. Today, one-fifth of American children are obese, and research shows that childhood obesity increases the likelihood of obesity in adulthood, creating tremendous financial burdens on families, our health care system, and our ability to remain safe and secure as a nation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only underscored how essential these programs are. At the peak of the hunger crisis last December, households with as many as 30 million adults and 14 million children reported that they did not have enough to eat, with disproportionate impacts on communities of color.
To address the pandemic, Congress provided new authority and resources, and USDA pivoted to ensure children and families had access to the benefits and services they needed. Now that America is on the move again, we are turning our focus to recovery and reopening. As you know, in April we extended a broad range of flexibilities to support school meal programs and childcare institutions across the country in serving healthy meals as they reopen. And we’re implementing the American Rescue Plan Act’s expansion of P-EBT benefits over the summer for low-income children of all ages, as well as the increase to WIC cash value vouchers for fruits and vegetables. These temporary measures will further promote food access for infants and young children, for whom nutrition security is particularly critical for growth and development.

The reauthorization process you have launched provides the opportunity to step back and reflect on what is working well and how we can strengthen the Child Nutrition and WIC programs permanently. I am pleased to start the conversation with you today. In the Administration’s view, the pandemic has exposed gaps in our safety net, highlighting the urgent need to shape more equitable and just nutrition programs for all Americans. In that spirit, the President proposed bold investments in children, nutrition, and schools, including more than $44 billion for Child Nutrition programs, in the American Families Plan. We recommend these proposals as you consider the full range of options to strengthen these programs. But before we move into the specifics, it’s useful to reflect on the tremendous reach and impact of WIC and Child Nutrition programs and how far we’ve come since the last reauthorization:

**Child Nutrition and WIC: A Record of Success**

Starting 75 years ago with the National School Lunch Act, and expanding and diversifying in the decades since, Congress has acted with bipartisan support to build the Child Nutrition and WIC programs into a system of targeted nutrition assistance that has delivered nutritious food to millions of American children, supporting their health and their education. They are vital to the health and well-being of our nation’s children.

- USDA’s school meals programs connect tens of millions of children to healthy meals that help them learn and grow every day, reaching children from the smallest rural communities to the largest cities. For many children, school meals provide the majority of their food on school days.
• Science-based nutrition standards have had a positive and significant influence on nutritional quality over the past decade. Since meal standards were improved in response to the 2010 Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, schools have made great strides in serving creative, healthy meals and children are eating better during the school day. A recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that during the past decade school meals became the most nutritious food source for American children. It also shows that improvements in school meals stemming from the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act were equitable across racial and socioeconomic groups.

• The Child and Adult Care Food Program is a key source of nutritious meals for pre-school children, and those in day care and after-school programs. The program also provides critical support for high-quality child care – an essential resource for millions of working families.

• These programs both promote and benefit from vibrant, resilient food systems. Through USDA Foods, over a billion dollars of domestically grown nutritious food are provided to schools annually, supporting American farmers. And creating linkages between local producers and meal service can make supply chains more sustainable as they grow children’s understanding of where their food comes from. Farm-to-school programs are just one great example of this synergy.

• Summer feeding programs offer nutritious meals to low-income children when school is out, when children are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.

• WIC is one of our most important and effective public health programs. There is strong evidence that WIC participation results in fewer infant deaths, fewer premature births, and increased birth weights—and reduces health care costs. It also leads to better health and academic outcomes for children and is one of the most powerful public health interventions available to reduce stark racial disparities in maternal and child health outcomes.

Administration Priorities and Key Opportunities
As the President’s American Families Plan invest in our kids, our families, and our economic future, it doubles down on addressing nutrition insecurity, which disproportionately affects low-income families and families of color. The AFP invests more than $44 billion in Child Nutrition programs to expand access to healthy school meals in high-poverty schools,
provide incentives to improve nutrition in the school environment, and create a permanent nation-wide Summer EBT program to guard against child hunger when schools are out. The American Families Plan also includes historic investments to make child care affordable for working families and provide high-quality early childhood education. As this Committee works to advance these proposals, we look forward to the opportunity to leverage the highly successful CACFP, which plays a critical role in supporting affordability and quality of care for low-income children and providing nutritious meals to helping lay the foundation for a lifetime of healthy eating.

I want to talk about four areas we view as top priorities for action in Child Nutrition and WIC:

Tackling the summer hunger gap by expanding summer EBT to all eligible children nationwide. Summer has always been a hard time for children at risk of hunger. When schools let out for summer, typically fewer than 1 in 5 eligible children get meals through summer food programs. Put simply, far too many children lose access to healthy meals during the summer.

But we know how to solve this problem. Over ten years ago, Congress funded, and USDA established Summer EBT—or electronic benefit transfer—pilot projects providing benefits to families with children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals to purchase food during the summer months.

Research from these pilots shows that Summer EBT works — it decreased food insecurity among children receiving benefits by one-third and improved their diet quality.

As part of the COVID-19 response, USDA has been administering a similar program — Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) — to provide food dollars to families with children missing free and reduced-price meals during school closures, and we’ve already seen evidence that this approach works. Analysis of Census Bureau data by the Brookings Institution found that P-EBT decreased food hardship faced by low-income children by 30 percent in the week following benefit issuance. I applaud Congress, under this Committee’s leadership, for its foresight in creating the successful P-EBT program and for recently extending it through the duration of the pandemic — including during the summer months.
For the first time this summer, resource-strapped families nationwide will receive EBT cards to buy groceries to make up for meals their children would typically receive at school. But we know that summer hunger won’t disappear when the public health emergency ends, and neither should summer benefits.

The American Families Plan invests over $25 billion to create a permanent nationwide Summer EBT program. Under the program, families of the 29 million American children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals will receive $75 per child per month to help put food on the table. Making this proven program permanent would reduce child hunger on a massive scale and ensure children continue to have the nutrition they need during the summer so they can return in the fall healthy and ready to learn. It would not replace summer meal service, which allows site-based enrichment programs to serve healthy meals to children during summer, but would complement it to ensure that children that may not have easy access to summer programs, including many in rural areas, still get the food they need.

Expanding access to nutritious school meals by making it easier for to children enroll and simpler for schools to manage. Prior to the pandemic, approximately 22 million children ate free or reduced-price meals at school, but we know that some eligible children do not receive free or reduced-price school meals, whether due to stigma, not knowing how to sign up, or other participation barriers.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a valuable tool to expand the reach of school meals in schools serving low-income communities. CEP allows schools that serve low-income families – where a high portion of children are eligible for SNAP - to provide meals to all students at no charge. CEP has increased participation in school breakfast and lunch, increasing children’s access to nutritious meals while also simplifying administration for schools so they can spend less time collecting applications and lunch money and more time preparing and serving nutritious meals.
Currently, only 70 percent of eligible schools participate in CEP—most because of financial concerns—making it harder for children in need to access free meals. The President’s plan provides more than $15 billion to expand the number of high-poverty schools providing meals to all children at no charge by increasing the proportion of costs covered by the federal government and making CEP financially viable for more schools. The plan increases support even further for elementary schools, to help kids start off on the right path from an early age.

The President’s plan also leverages data sharing, so that income-eligible children who receive Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income will be automatically certified to receive them. This reduces the burden on families that have already proven their income and on schools that don’t have to process redundant paperwork.

Together, these changes would provide nutritious school meals at no cost to an additional 9.3 million children, about 70 percent of them in elementary schools. An estimated 40 percent of school districts that may be able to expand their participation due to this plan are in rural areas. We look forward to working with you to advance these policies.

**Strengthening nutrition across Child Nutrition programs and WIC – to give kids a healthier future.** USDA is committed to strong nutrition standards because evidence tells us they work. Amidst all of the discussion and controversy around some changes to school meals standards, we cannot lose sight of the tremendous progress achieved by schools in making meals healthier. I’ve already mentioned that school meals have become the most nutritious single food source for American children, but here is more evidence. A USDA study of meals prepared under the new standards found that lunches consumed by NSLP participants had higher proportions of vegetables, whole grains, and dairy foods than prior school meals. They also had lower proportions of refined grains and empty calories. All of this is great news for kids and their families, and all of us working to support their long-term health.

This is not to say that it’s easy to change kids’ eating habits (parents know that it isn’t), that the standards and implementation timelines were perfect, or that schools don’t face challenges to improving nutrition. But the future payoffs of even incremental changes are
extraordinary. We are committed to science-based nutrition targets that have proven effective at driving better meals that promote health. What we must do is continue and complete the work, with schools and all those that support them, to get these pro-health changes to every family, on timelines that are realistic and reasonable, and that deliver meals that are not only nutritious, but that kids will enjoy eating. Changing the eating patterns of today’s children is changing the eating patterns of tomorrow’s adults – and the health and well-being of our nation.

USDA will be updating nutrition standards in Child Nutrition programs and the WIC food package to reflect the latest Dietary Guidelines, and we also need to make sure that standards are appropriate for summer feeding programs to ensure children have access to nutritious meals whether school is in session or not. The Department will also do more to support and facilitate school efforts to improve meals and the school nutrition environment. Building on progress made on improving the nutrition standards of school meals, the American Families Plan includes a new $1 billion initiative to support schools in expanding their healthy food offerings and to test strategies for encouraging healthy lifestyles – to advance ambitious goals with practical, achievable action.

With this funding, schools could receive financial incentives to adopt healthy practices that go above and beyond the required meal standards. For example, this could include doing more scratch cooking, expanding the use of local and culturally appropriate foods, reducing sales of less healthy options during the school day or increasing time for physical activity. Staying focused on what works, USDA will engage States and schools to conduct a robust evaluation of the impact of these efforts on school meal participation, educational outcomes, and overall well-being to inform future policy making.

**Connecting more eligible women and young children to WIC and strengthening service delivery.** Evidence is clear that participation in WIC drives better health for infants and supports more nutritious diets and better health care for children, all while producing higher academic achievement for students. Unfortunately, the share of eligible families participating in WIC has declined over the past decade; only about half of eligible low-income individuals were participating in 2017. The number of WIC participants continued falling at the end of 2019, and
Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you for your testimony. And now under Committee Rule 9(a), we will question the witness under the five-minute rule. I will be recognizing Subcommittee members in seniority order. Again to ensure the five-minute rule is adhered to, staff will keep track of the time, and the timer will shine a light when the time has expired. Please be attentive to the time. Wrap up when your time is over and remute your microphone.

As Chair, I recognize myself for five minutes. And Under Secretary Dean, I have three questions, so I am going to State them all now and then give you time to respond.

First under the Trump administration Oregon was removed from the summer EBT demonstration program. I am grateful that the Biden administration has proposed making summer EBT nationwide and permanent. What will this policy mean to families who will now be able to rely on help with groceries during the summer?

The second question is in the American Rescue Plan President Biden laid out key investments in childcare. Our Committee recently heard testimony from Mr. Rasheed Malik, an early childhood policy expert who emphasized the importance of the Child and Adult Care Food Program. So what improvements could Congress make to CACFP to better support the childcare infrastructure? Do...
you agree with Mr. Malik and with me that CACFP should provide reimbursement for a third meal to children in full daycare?

And then finally, the WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program provides a great opportunity to connect pregnant women and young children to healthy local produce. And it also supports our farmers. What flexibilities did the families first to coronavirus act provide to WIC FMNP? And how can the program operate most effectively moving forward?

And I am going to give you the rest of the time to respond.

Ms. DEAN. Well, thank you for that. All right. That is a list all right. So let’s begin with summer EBT. You asked me what the impact of the national program having would be and I would say first, to respond to your example about Oregon, States will no longer have to apply to be part of a demo that is very limited and typically sub-State. This will be a nationwide policy that will apply to what in 2019 would have been 29 million children.

Which means every State and every family can count on these benefits. And I think that is the most critical aspect. It is also evidence based. We know this worked to reduce child food insecurity by a third and we have more recent evidence from the Brookings Institution that also shows that these benefits make a core difference. So I think I will just stop there because I think that is incredibly powerful in terms of what we will be able to do with respect to summer hunger.

On your CACFP question, I am so excited about the President’s proposed investment in childcare, and particularly excited about the role CACFP can play. As you know, CACFP is an entitlement program so it will be allowed to flex as childcare grows and we see more providers in the system. We know CACFP can connect with them. But and I think your bill is a perfect demonstration of this there is a lot we can do to simplify the program and make it more appealing to providers.

So you have ideas around extending connecting—the enrollment of the—sorry, the providers that are in reducing paperwork. We think those are all terrific changes. And we want to make sure that we are reaching out to all new providers to connect them.

I think your point about adding a third meal is going to be very important for the Committee to consider, because one of the reasons we want to see these investments in childcare is so that parents have a safe secure place for their kids where they know their kids are well taken care of as they consider job opportunities. And we don’t want a parent to have to forego a job where they might need an extra hour or two on the job if they are worried that their kids won’t have supper. So I think it is a terrific proposal. And I hope the Committee will support it.

All right. Let me keep going. WIC farmers markets, it is a wonderful program. And we did need flexibilities in the past year and appreciated the ability to offer those. An example of one was when we had new farmers markets wanting to come on board that they were able to do for example remote training, so that things didn’t have to be in person. And I think that is just a key takeaway from this past year.

And in fact, we see here in this Committee hearing there is a lot of work we can do and a lot of providers that we can reach now
with using alternatives to exclusively in person. And I think that is the key learning we want to bring forward. And with the WIC 390 fund that we are calling per the investments on the rescue plan, making sure that we are bringing along with farmers market as an expanded resource to our WIC participants will be a key part of what we are doing.

So I hope that got to your questions.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. You did answer all of my questions with a couple of seconds to spare. Thank you very much.

It is my understanding that the Ranking Member of the full Committee, Dr. Foxx, will be next for five minutes.

Ranking Member Foxx, I recognize you for five minutes for your questions.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Ms. Dean, thank you for coming today. The last 15 months have demonstrated the power of communities stepping up to help their neighbors and friends. And the Trump administration implemented the waiver authority granted to it to help ensure all students continue to have access to food.

We also know that there are some changes that will continue after all students are back in school. And we want the students to be back in school, obviously. Can you briefly tell us about some of the changes that will continue in the school meal program focusing on service and preparations?

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Congresswoman Foxx for that question.

You point out one the core flexibilities that the Secretary wanted to be sure that schools had is that while we absolutely want all students back, and as a parent I can underscore that, we aren’t completely certain of what the public health requirements will be for congregate feeding.

So will students be able to be in the cafeteria together or spacing apart or might they need to be served lunch in the classroom? So one of the core flexibilities that we are offering is the ability to serve meals in a non-congregate environment.

We want schools to be able to pivot and flex for circumstances as they unfold and as they may be specific to their communities.

So I hope that answers your question.

Ms. FOXX. So I am imagining, I have been in schools lots of times where the students have picked up their lunches and taken them back into the classroom. So I am assuming that is one of the flexibilities that they might have.

Ms. DEAN. Absolutely.

Ms. FOXX. OK. OK. So given some of these changes, I agree with my colleague, Mr. Fulcher, who said reauthorizing to the old way of doing things is not responsible legislating. We need to understand how these changes are working, what challenges schools are facing, how students are adapting to them.

I hope the USDA will keep an open mind and listen to what is working and what is not before cementing any requirements in the law and regulations. Ms. Dean, will you commit to ensuring USDA will work with us to include changes for the future and not just focus on old positions and understanding of how the program works in the schools.
Ms. DEAN. You absolutely have my commitment that we want to work with this Committee on child nutrition policy.

Ms. FOXX. Great. I am in the classrooms and cafeterias when I am in schools, and I am in schools a good bit. And I talk to the people working in the cafeteria. They are just among the most dedicated people in the world.

So are you making a commitment to have this program work in the future with the professionals on the ground? And those almost all women who work in those cafeterias and food service really want to do good for the students.

So will you commit to collaborating, consulting, and working with the doers in this program, those people serving the food, preparing the food to help ensure it works for students, schools, and program partners.

Ms. DEAN. Yes, absolutely. And that is not just for with respect to the standards that we will be updating and setting, but also implementation. This enterprise has a lot of different players. First and foremost are those incredible as you say women on the ground that are preparing, serving meals every day.

Ms. FOXX. Right. You mentioned earlier evidence based. That is a nice code word we hear a lot. But I am very interested in accountability. I asked the hardworking taxpayers to give up their money to bureaucrats in the Federal Government. And what they want is to know their money is being spent well.

So what accountability measures are you putting in place to show that the summer programs particularly are having the desired effect of ensuring that students are getting meals that they need?

Ms. DEAN. Well, that is a terrific question. I think just first let me say the evidence is based off a very robust research evaluation that was done several years ago. But as we move forward, for establishing this program through the American Families Plan, they have the opportunity to work together to ensure the appropriate accountability.

So I look forward to working with your office on that as the Committee develops the final details of the summer EBT program.

Ms. FOXX. Well, we will be back in touch with you with some suggestions on how we think the accountability should be developed. Thank you very much.

And I yield back.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. And thank you Dr. Foxx.

I next recognize Dr. Adams for five minutes for your questions.

Ms. ADAMS. Thank you, Chair Bonamici, and Ranking Member Fulcher for hosting the hearing today. And thank you to our witness, Under Secretary Dean for your testimony.

This is an incredibly important topic. Hunger in our country has increased substantially during the COVID–19 pandemic. And thanks to the work of our Committee on pandemic relief over the past year and President Biden and Under Secretary Dean’s work implementing the important anti-hunger policies, the number of Americans struggling with hunger is now at its lowest level since the pandemic began. However, we have a lot of work to do.

Ms. Dean, we know that healthy school meals are critical to children’s health and academic achievement, but we also know that
school nutrition staff need support to create meals that are healthy and enjoyable for children and to help children develop healthy habits. And the American Families Plan the Biden administration proposed a billion dollars to provide additional support and incentives for schools to create a healthy school nutrition environment.

My question to you is why is this additional funding important? And what are some examples of ways that schools could use the proposed funding?

Ms. DEAN. Well, thanks for asking me that. I think we are looking to spark that local innovation that several of you have already spoken about. Let's say for example and let me be clear, we do want to work with the Committee on establishing what the standards would be for qualifying for these additional funds.

So it might be exceeding the standards, say with respect to one of the limits. It might be more physical activity. It might be thinking about an innovative way to integrate nutrition education, as the Ranking Member mentioned, into the core curriculum.

We have several ideas, but I think we want to hear from our school group leaders about what they think would spark the most innovation and of course from you all about the areas where we can drive change with some financial incentives.

Ms. ADAMS. Right. Thank you. We know that WIC is critical to improving maternal and infant health outcomes. And I appreciate the fact that the Biden administration has made WIC a key piece of its agenda to prevent maternal mortality, particularly for Black, indigenous, and other women of color. So can you speak to some of the specific projects that your agency is working on to improve access to WIC and to help it play a bigger role in preventing maternal mortality?

Ms. DEAN. Yes. Thank you for that question. So our fundamental goal is to connect more eligible families to WIC because it has proven benefits with respect to birth outcomes and basic child development, basic health, and development for young kids.

So we need to connect more eligibles. We want to improve the participants experience, potentially using a technology as a means to streamline and make it easier to enroll, as well as to use benefits. And also see ways that we can streamline benefit delivery and service.

So for example, more effectively connecting WIC to participants' healthcare providers so that records could be exchanged, and we could reduce the cost and time for participants in the WIC clinic. All of this is oriented around being a part of the administration's broader goals to address maternal mortality and core racial disparities there. So we welcome your ideas on that front.

Ms. ADAMS. One of the issues we heard about from healthcare providers who see WIC patients is that the data is not always shared in an efficient manner between WIC and medical providers. So, you know, what can we do to facilitate this exchange of information.

Ms. DEAN. Well, that is core to our goals is to make sure that to the extent participants want that data that they give their permission that we can make sure that we are sharing back and forth. And we often hear that families show up at WIC clinics more fre-
quently sometimes than well baby visits and this is a key way to get information back to the doctors as well. So that is top of mind for us. And we are meeting with HHS, as well as State health leads so that we can sort out what barriers stand in our way.

Ms. Adams. Right.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I yield back.

Chairwoman Bonamici. Thank you, Dr. Adams.

Next, I recognize the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Mr. Fulcher, for five minutes for your questions.

Mr. Fulcher. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Dean, thank you for joining us here today. There is a lot of stuff that you covered and a lot that we need to cover. But before I get to questions, I want to just highlight one issue that I hope is behind us and will remain behind us, and it is critical a child nutrition programs meet their intended purpose in that is putting together those rules the agency not hurt any State industries in those efforts.

A few years ago, you may recall there was an attack on a white potato. And being from Idaho you might imagine there was a few people who lost their sense of humor over that. So I hope that you will maintain the white potato as an allowable under the school meal and WIC programs.

And moving on to other issues, I think the cost in this program is also important to discuss. And I will go on record and say that the reauthorization process I believe should be budget neutral and focus on targeting benefits to those in need.

However, I also think it is critical that these programs not include any unfunded mandates or hidden compliance costs to the school.

So Ms. Dean, do you recall what the proposed cost of the meal standards rule was back in 2011.

Ms. Dean. I do not.

Mr. Fulcher. It was over $6 billion. And the final cost estimate of that wound up being about $3.2 billion. And I will just add, do you know why it was less than what the proposal was?

Ms. Dean. No. I welcome you.

Mr. Fulcher. It was because the implementation for the breakfast requirements was delayed. And so that was supposedly an attempt to get things healthier, the sodium and fat levels had been adjusted, but those rules got delayed.

In fact the rule, the actual rule was stated as follows in the executive summary, most notably this final rule provides an additional time for implementation of breakfast requirements and modifies those requirements in a manner that reduces the estimated cost of breakfast changes as compared to the proposed rule.

And so as a result, the fine rule estimated at $3.2 billion over the course of 5 years. And so that was considerably less. So that just states the true impact of what was going on at that time.

So just moving on, while the USDA noted other changes to help offset the cost of these regulations, the school groups have been very clear. These regulations to added significant unreimbursed cost do not include the additional cost born by schools such as labor and compliance costs.
So another question, Ms. Dean, I don’t believe it is acceptable for the Federal Government to put requirements on schools that add additional compliance costs. And I hope this time around Secretary Vilsack will commit to limiting the negative impact on regulations. Will you make that commitment in terms of those costs on the schools?

Ms. DEAN. Well, Mr. Ranking Member, I think the goal of the standards is to increase the health and quality of food the kids are eating, and we know that does . We also know that the vast majority of schools were able to meet the standards. And so I think with respect to your question we want to consider costs absolutely, the meal reimbursement.

The meals have to be able to—sorry, meet the cost within the reimbursement rate. But I am not sure. So I feel like all of those pieces will come into play as we move forward with setting the new standards and working on reasonable, feasible implementation.

Mr. FULCHER. Can I just point out that there truly is a cost to this, and that cost does not necessarily bear improvement. And so, that is the point of going down that line of questioning.

So in your testimony, you highlighted the President’s billion-dollar proposal to create an incentive fund for healthy foods. Can you just give us a little more detail on how this proposed program interacts with the current requirements and to meet the current standards and the regulations? And how can you ensure this will be voluntary and not overly burdensome?

Ms. DEAN. Well, we do intend for it to be voluntary, to put out an incentive fund for districts. And just let me make sure I underscore this for you because I am not sure you understood that it is for districts to give them increased financial reimbursement if they for example wanted to meet a higher target with respect to healthy meals, perhaps do something with respect to increased physical activity, change the way food is displayed in the lunch line, to put healthier food first.

I think the idea is we want to work with the Committee to come up with what those innovative practices would be that we would help incent schools to adopt. And the whole idea here is to support local innovation and different local approaches with respect to healthy standards.

Mr. FULCHER. OK. And so, the point I am trying to make is that please be careful of the burdensome bureaucracy that some of this can create because we have to put this implementation on the ground.

And with that, my time is running out. Madam Chair, I yield back.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you so much.

I now recognize Representative Hayes for five minutes for your questions.

Ms. HAYES. Thank you, Madam Chair. And thank you Deputy Under Secretary Dean for being with us today.

This hearing could not come at a more important time. Over the past year the State of Connecticut and our Nation have faced a fierce battle with child food insecurity. While the COVID–19 pandemic put the gaps in our safety nets for parents and children on full display, it did not create them.
As an educator, I can tell you that 2020 was not the first time children have gone hungry. Long before the onset of this pandemic, children in my classroom would put their heads on their desks because they hadn't had a meal for the day. Mothers utilizing WIC ran out of benefits mid-month and had to figure out how to scrape by.

And millions of families who live paycheck to paycheck lined up weekly at food banks to make sure they had basic staples in their kitchen. So thank you, Under Secretary Dean for being here today to discuss this crucial work at USDA to alleviate food insecurity and for the administration’s prioritization of child nutrition in the American Families Plan.

First, I would like to focus on the WIC participation. We know that the WIC program is highly effective at improving birth outcomes. Yet, we also know that many eligible women, infant, and children are not participating in this program.

Ms. Dean, what ideas do you have about how to make it easier for families to participate in WIC? And what supports do you think that Congress needs to put in place to address this issue? Also, how can different programs share information to streamline the process for participation.

Ms. Dean. Well, I will give you two specific examples just building off of what you just said. So first off, pregnant, postpartum women, infants, and children who are participating in Medicaid or SNAP are income eligible for WIC.

So I think it is critical that we not just make it so that if a participant shows up at a WIC clinic and shows their SNAP information that they can qualify that we want to actually be getting aggressive in what we call in reach to household on SNAP and WIC who qualify for WIC but who are not participating. That is a group of folks who have self-identified as being at nutrition risk and in need of help with respect to health security.

We want to work to connect them over. And I think setting some cross enrollment standards the way you have done from SNAP to school meals could really help galvanize attention and focus on this issue on a State and local level.

And another quick example would be we have very high participation amongst infants, but we see WIC participation trail off as the children get older.

So we actually often need to be focusing on retention, not just outreach to newly eligible. So those are two examples of things that we would love to work with you on. And we will be using funds you gave us to spearhead efforts as well.

Mrs. Hayes. Thank you. I am currently working on legislation to make it easier for families to participate in WIC and I look forward to working with this administration to make that a priority.

Summer nutrition programs faces similar participation problem. In fact, the most recent data available from the USDA, only one in seven children who are eligible for free meals through the Summer Food Participation Program actually receive those meals in the summer. The American Families Plan proposes making the successful summer EBT pilot program a program in which families who are eligible for these meal benefits permanent. Ms. Dean, what impact do you anticipate the expansion will have on child hunger?
Ms. DEAN. Well, the evidence would suggest that it could reduce child food insecurity by 30 percent to a third. So quite significant. And that is really the core motivation for doing this. It is an effective demonstrated approach that we know will—sorry, we are very confident will reduce child hunger.

Mrs. HAYES. Thank you. I think we hear a lot from people here about practitioners on the ground. I am an educator by profession and for 15 years I was in the classroom. I always had a summer program. We always had summer meals in the community.

And I can tell you with fidelity the impact that that has when parents and children were lined up around the corner before we even opened in the morning because for many of them, that was the only meal they would get. And at lunchtime those same families would come back and receive lunch.

So this work is critical. It is important. It is necessary in our communities. And it is something that I look forward to partnering with the administration to make sure that our children are not hungry because it is not their fault, many of the situations that they are in.

So with that, Madam Chair, I yield back.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you so much for your questions.

Next, I recognize Representative Fitzgerald for five minutes for your questions.

Mr. FITZGERALD. Thank you, Madam Chair. Ms. Dean, thanks for being here today.

As a Member of Congress from Wisconsin, you can probably understand my concerns about WIC and it is relationship to dairy, both milk that is part of the program, as well as cheese. And the sodium question continues to kind of pop up and the relationship to a total diet that most kids would be given on a daily basis.

It can lead some students I think there is kind of a question as to are the sodium limits too low and how are those going to be gauged moving forward? That would be my first question.

Ms. DEAN. So thank you for the question. It gives me an opportunity to make sure everyone knows that we will be updating the nutrition standards in the school meals program as well as WIC to reflect the new dietary guidelines. That is a process we need to undertake.

It is also an important opportunity for us to rethink not just what the standards are but the implementation timelines to get there. What the nutritionists at FNS tell me, this amazing group of people, as well as school food leaders school leaders—we need good high-quality standards that are pushing all of us to advance, but we also need time to get there. And that is how we will be approaching this.

But we need input from industry, from social leaders, from dieticians, from the heart association, from across the board so that we pull together the right standards with practical and feasible implementation guidelines.

Mr. FITZGERALD. Just to put on your way radar screen, I am sure you are aware of it, but there seems to be questions about the level of the whole grain requirement as well. Yes, that seems to be a concern.
The other thing would be when you are looking at kind of school lunches and the variety. And I know that Congressman Fulcher brought this up earlier, just the desire of some elementary students to want to have that school lunch every day and whether or not its desirable. I think it kind of goes back to whether or not those sodium and the variety that is offered in specifically milk products.

I remember when I was a kid, you would have two cartons of milk. One would be chocolate and one would be regular white milk. Whole milk by the way, we didn’t have 1 percent back then. But moving forward, I think there is kind of a desire again to make school lunches something that kids really look forward to and they want to consume. And I would hope that that would be integrated into any of the decisions made with kind of the levels of consideration for all of these items so.

Ms. DEAN. Right. Tastiness has got to be a critical part of this, but also is a knowing that we have got to push our kids to eat well. And the first time your child rejects a green bean or Brussels sprout you don’t give up.

So I think that is part of the balance here. It is taste and appeal, as well as continuing to offer healthy nutritious food, which will not just affect their health today but their lifetime.

Mr. FITZGERALD. In the last minute that I have, could you just talk a little bit about farm to school, that program, and how it is viewed? And kind of what the status is of it? And how do you see it moving forward? Because it has been a great success, I think.

Ms. DEAN. Oh, that is wonderful to hear. Farm to school I think is one of our most successful and cherished programs from all corners of the country. They did wonderful job connecting local producers to schools, teaching kids about where their food comes from, helping schools meet their Buy America requirements, and of course fulfill the nutrition standards with healthy, delicious food.

So we would love to do more with that program and would be happy to work with the Committee on addressing minor barriers that can prevent some schools from coming in. But it is wonderful success. We want to continue to grow it.

Mr. FITZGERALD. Thank you, Madam Chair. I yield back.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you.

And next I recognize Representative Mrvan for five minutes for your questions.

Mr. MRVAN. Good afternoon. I thank you very much for your testimony, for your engagement.

Very quickly, my wife is a dietician. I am excited that we are talking about sodium intake and salt. But most importantly realizing that the goal is to remove obstacles for children to make sure that they are in an environment to learn and that they are properly fed and have nutrition. That being said, I also was a township trustee that provided poor relief to over 180,000 individuals. And we worked very closely during the pandemic with the school systems to make sure that those most vulnerable populations were able to receive meals and even beyond and what a difference that that made.

So I want to among those thousands of families, I want to thank you for that initiative in going forward and have participated making sure families were aware of the summer programs. That being
said, I am grateful that we now have an administration that is committed to ending the COVID–19 pandemic. But I do worry about the economic impacts of COVID–19 will be ongoing for many families.

Ms. Dean, what are some of the ongoing challenges you think families will face when it comes to feeding their children over the next few years? And what can Congress do to ease that transition as children go back to school and certain emergency relief programs, including the pandemic EBT and when it starts to expire?

Ms. Dean. Thank you very much for that question and for your leadership on these issues for some time. You know, as the economy begins to recover, which will be wonderful news, it is important to remember that low-income households typically don't experience economic improvement as quickly as the rest of the country.

We may continue to see elevated unemployment and high rates of poverty. And so that often for example in my world shows up as continued elevated enrollment in SNAP. And that is just because economic recovery is not always equally felt.

This president is focused on making sure that this recovery is truly progressive and brings along the whole country. And some of the things that he believes will help achieve that are in the families plan and the jobs plan.

So making a strong childcare so that all parents know that their kids are healthy and safe, they are out looking for work, a stronger unemployment insurance program, continued support through SNAP.

These are the kinds of wraparounds—as well as paid leave, these are the kinds of wraparounds that will help bring strong economic recovery for everyone. And I appreciate your focus on the fact that not everyone will experience the economy snapping back quite as quickly and we need to be mindful of that.

Mr. Mrvan. I thank you very much for your testimony and your commitment to school children.

And with that, I yield back, Chairwoman.

Chairwoman Bonamici. Thank you very much. Next, I recognize Representative Spartz for five minutes for your questions.

Mrs. Spartz. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And I have a question for Ms. Dean related, as a former auditor, to some fraud and audits.

So as I look up in 2019, Government Accountability Office cited USDA for not assessing fraud risk comprehensively and in compliance with the Fraud Risk Framework. They also noted the high estimated improper payment error rates and vulnerability to fraud. So this is a problem with high risk of fraud.

And my question is for you, now you are asking, you know, for $45 billion more for expenditure in this program. So I would like to know what processes you are implementing to make sure you are in compliance with the Fraud Risk Framework, and you have proper control to address the risk of fraud.

Ms. Dean. Thank you very much for that question, Congresswoman. You raised a critical point. The public's trust in us is critical to me and knowing that taxpayer dollars are going for their intended purpose is critical. It is the core component of what we need to do and how we want to design these programs.
So one of the things that is wonderful about the summer EBT program is because it will pivot off of enrollment in other programs, for example, SNAP, that does an incredibly robust and rigorous assessment of eligibility. We have a high degree of confidence about eligibility for those benefits and, of course, we know that families are using those benefits for food. So I think we feel very good about that, but we would be happy to work with the Committee.

And let me also say one other thing. Our budget isn’t out yet. That will be forthcoming, of course, in a couple of weeks. But one of the things that I want to do at FNS is we absolutely need to increase our staff, our extraordinary group of people here.

Federal spending on the Nutrition Programs has grown significantly while our staff has shrunk, and that compromises our ability to oversee these programs. And I want to lean in and acknowledge that and ask for the resources we need to steward these programs to the high degree that the public and you expect.

Mrs. SPARTZ. So generally, if you say you are planning to implement, I want to confirm, because the Government Accountability Office said that they recommend for Food and Nutrition Services to establish a process—who administer them—to plan and conduct regular progress assessments for the School Meals Program that align with leading practices in the Fraud Risk Framework.

So are you planning to perform these regular assessments of fraud risk and internal procedures to make sure that you are complying with that Framework?

Ms. DEAN. So we have fairly regular assessments on program integrity. But since I am not tracking to the specific issue that you are raising; can I followup with you on that to make sure—

Mrs. SPARTZ. I just wanted to make sure because I wanted to see. They haven’t released the recent—what is happening in 2020. That was a review of 2019. But since we are looking to expand even further some of these programs, we need to make sure that we have proper procedures and controls in place, and you are complying with Fraud Risk Assessment Framework that the Government Accountability Office requires all other agencies to.

So I would be happy to followup with you and make sure that you have these processes and have it on your radar too.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you. I appreciate that. I will followup.

Mrs. SPARTZ. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you. I now recognize Representative Bowman for five minutes for your questions.

Mr. BOWMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Dean, thank you so much for appearing before us today. I represent the 16th District of New York, which includes parts of the Bronx and parts of Westchester. I am hearing directly from my constituents who qualify for SNAP that they are experiencing problems with applying for and receiving benefits.

One recurring piece of feedback I get is that the once-a-month distribution of benefits creates problems at the end of the month when they have already expended the majority or all of their benefits.

In addition to increasing the SNAP benefit, what kind of administrative costs would be associated with distributing benefits on a
biweekly basis so that the pacing reflects a more realistic pattern for getting food throughout the month.

Ms. Dean. Thank you. Interesting question. So I think the statute, the SNAP statute actually prohibits splitting issuance into two, wanting to give the control to households on how they manage and budget their funds.

But I think—so I think the core issue is making sure that households have a benefit that is sufficient. And so you are giving me the opportunity to just remind folks that the Secretary, at Congress’ direction, has asked us to reevaluate SNAP’s Thrifty Food Program, the basis for the basic benefit, to ensure that it is an adequate level to purchase a healthy diet with respect to the dietary guidelines and also sort of consistent with current prices and consumer spending patterns.

So we hope to wrap that process up this summer. And it is my hope that when households have a realistic benefit that will allow them to access nutritious food, that we will take away some of this core stress and this end-of-month crisis.

Mr. Bowman. Thank you.

Ms. Dean. Thank you.

Mr. Bowman. Also, the enacted COVID relief packages to date have been responsive to the dramatic increase in food insecurity experienced by children and families this past year.

But that combined investment has not been sufficient to end food insecurity overall. Tens of millions of families are struggling today to feed themselves. As a former educator and principal myself, I know that if a child is hungry, they can’t focus on learning in the classroom.

What level of investment would be necessary, is necessary to permanently end domestic food insecurity?

Ms. Dean. That is a good question. You know, I don’t know the answer to that, but I do think that a big part of it is not just with respect to food assistance. I mean, you, as an educator, probably could tell me more about what families need. They need good-paying jobs. They need access to health coverage so that they are not choosing between paying medical bills and feeding their kids, and they need affordable, safe places to live.

So I think that is a big part of why the Families Plan, the Jobs Plan, and the Rescue Plan together are trying to deal with the conditions that cause people to be hungry. And I think that is the better way. That, along with a strong economy and good-paying jobs, is the right pathway forward to addressing hunger.

Mr. Bowman. Thank you, Madam Chair. And I yield back.

Chairwoman Bonamici. Thank you very much.

Now we are going to hear from the Chairman of the full Committee, Congressman Scott. I recognize you for five minutes.

Mr. Scott. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you, Ms. Dean, for being with us today. We heard about that code word “evidence-based.” I was just wondering if we can count on you to make your decisions based on evidence rather than slogans and sound bites?

Ms. Dean. Always. I am an analyst at heart. Absolutely.

Mr. Scott. Thank you. The Community Eligibility Program, you mentioned that decreases paperwork and administrative costs,
helps families who fall just outside the eligibility limits, removes the stigma. Some children have to go through paperwork, others don’t.

You mentioned that about nine million additional children will be covered by Community Eligibility. How close are we getting to universal coverage for school meals? We have had proposals from members of the Committee to just serve everybody. Are we getting close?

Ms. Dean. Thanks for asking. I think with the American Families Plan proposal, we believe we would reach about half of our Nation’s schools. Unfortunately, half of our Nation’s schools are high-poverty schools, where they are serving a significant share of low-income children. And I think we would hit about 45 percent of the kids. So—

Mr. Scott. With Community Eligibility. And then the rest have to go through paperwork to get qualified. So that we would only be adding on—we are getting close to where we can add, and it would be affordable just to do everybody. So just keep that in mind.

On the automatic eligibility, can you talk about how valuable that is. If you have Medicaid or if you have got SSI, you are automatically qualified. You don’t have to do all the paperwork. You don’t have to go find records and everything. How helpful is that?

Ms. Dean. I would love to talk about that. So the way it works right now is mostly through SNAP. And imagine a mom who goes and applies for SNAP, which is a very rigorous process. It can take hours. They have to turn in paperwork. There is an interview. She has self-identified as food insecure and in need of help.

And so the way the law works now is, in applying for SNAP, if she has school-age children, they are automatically picked up and enrolled into free school meals. And I think that is the right values, and that is government helping someone in need.

What the American Families Plan would do is propose to extend that to Medicaid and SSI, where, again, parents are going through an incredibly rigorous process. And it seems to me government is at its best when it is offering them that additional help, passporting those kids over to free school meals. It also increases program integrity. So it is a wonderful way to connect folks to the Meals Program.

Mr. Scott. OK. Thank you.

The Pandemic EBT was extended through the end of the public health emergency. We are aware that 40 States have already gotten qualified for K through 12. Twenty-two States have done children under six. What is the agency doing to make sure all of the States get qualified as soon as possible?

Ms. Dean. I have an update on that. We are actually up to 43 States with school plans and 24 on childcare.

My team has to report into me basically every 2 days on where we are at. And with every State where we haven’t got—where it is submitted but not approved or it hasn’t yet been submitted, I am aware of exactly where it is, because we intend to get to all States.

Mr. Scott. Good. You said the majority of the school districts comply with the school nutrition standards. What does majority mean?
Ms. DEAN. You know, I would need to get back to you with the exact number but we have—
Mr. SCOTT. It is virtually all of them, isn’t it?
Ms. DEAN. Thank you. Yes, thank you. It is virtually all.
Mr. SCOTT. OK. And in plate waste, where students are not eating the food, have you found that to be no worse with good nutrition than with bad nutrition?
Ms. DEAN. It is actually less bad with good nutrition. We see increased intake of vegetables and dairy and good healthy food and less plate waste overall, relative to the food that kids bring from home.
Mr. SCOTT. So that the districts aren’t having problems complying and the children are getting better nutrition would suggest that we don’t need to dilute the nutrition standards, it seems to me.
Ms. DEAN. It would absolutely suggest that.
Mr. SCOTT. Thank you.
Thank you, Madam Chair.
Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you, Chairman Scott.
Now I recognize Representative Leger Fernández for five minutes for your questions.
Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.
And congratulations, Ms. Dean, on your appointment. I look forward to working with you. As I noted, I am from New Mexico and have many Tribes in my district, so I want to touch on those issues a little bit later.
But I really am grateful for the decision to expand until 2022 and the idea of enrolling more schools and perhaps expanding the Community Program so that we avoid that paperwork. I hear about that often. You know, my State has a majority of Title I schools.
But I want to talk a little bit about lunch shaming, you know, which will happen if we don’t get to more universal provision of school lunches. And, as you know and as the Committee knows, that is a practice of embarrassing or singling out children who can’t afford the school lunch that day.
And, you know, in 2010, Congress did address the USDA and asked them to provide a response. There were several fact sheets that the USDA has issued, one of which was entitled “Meal Charges Fact Sheet,” which I am going to quote, says: “USDA requires school food authorities to develop and communicate a policy for handling unpaid meal charges, but allows local officials to define how that policy works.” In another fact sheet, the Preventing Lunch Shaming: Communication Strategies, it simply says that USDA discourages the use of hand stamps, stickers, et cetera.
I ask unanimous consent to put these documents into the record, Madam Chair.
Chairwoman BONAMICI. Without objection.
Ms. LEGER FERNÁNDEZ. So I wanted to ask you whether USDA currently has a policy that explicitly prohibits lunch shaming, or is it merely guidance to discourage the practice?
Ms. DEAN. We require the locals to have a policy. So, as I think you actually accurately described our policy. And, you know, I would really like to work with the Committee so that we can do better. Children should not be put in the middle of this problem.
And that is just unacceptable, and we need to see if there is a way that we can develop a framework so that districts just don’t do that.

Ms. DEAN. I really appreciate hearing that. You know, I had the example of the little Alabama child who was stamped with “I need money for my lunch,” and I take it you would agree that that is unacceptable.

Ms. DEAN. Yes. In my position and as a parent, yes, I feel that way very strongly. So it is tricky, and we need to sort out how to do it, but we look forward to working with you on that.

Ms. LÉGER FERNÁNDEZ. I look forward to working with you as well. I will be reintroducing the Anti-Lunch Shaming Act to prohibit, not simply discourage but actually prohibit schools from publicly stigmatizing a child who can’t afford their lunch. And, you know, as you pointed out, school hunger is an issue, and it is not the child’s fault, and we need to take care to not put that blame on the child.

I wanted to move a bit to the issue of Tribal Nutrition Programs. As you are aware, that there are some limitations on the ability of Tribes to administer the Food Assistance Programs. I am going to be looking at introducing the Tribal Nutrition Improvement Act to make sure that Tribes can administer the Food Assistance Programs directly. In my experience—I have worked with Tribes for 30 years—self-determination we have found out works really well.

But can you describe what actions the Department of Agriculture is taking to ensure Tribes that have been really hit hard by the pandemic, what actions is USDA taking right now to assist with these Nutrition Programs and allowing the Tribes to have the control they need?

Ms. DEAN. Well, thank you for the question. And I know that my staff and your staff have been talking about that bill. So I look forward to the next steps on that.

First off, USDA has held I believe two formal consultations across the agency to hear from Tribes, just to begin to renew our relationship and to do it in a way that respects Tribal sovereignty. We have held Tribal consultation with respect to the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, which is a Tribal alternative to SNAP, and I have also done specialized stakeholder listening.

So one, it just begins with hearing what the issues are and where and how our programs are being responsive. There has been a significant amount of targeted assistance provided to Tribes, which I can followup with you on. But clearly, there is more we can do, particularly with respect to the way the relationship works.

Ms. LÉGER FERNÁNDEZ. I look forward to that ongoing communication and thank you for listening to the Tribes.

My time is up. I yield back.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you.

I see no other members for questions, so I want to now remind my colleagues that—was there another Member present?

Mr. FULCHER. Madam Chair, this is Congressman Fulcher. I just wanted to—if there was an opportunity for a closing statement, I would like to make that when the time is right.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. Yes, we will get to that. I just want to make sure we got all the members for questions.
Mr. FULCHER. Great. Thank you.
Chairwoman BONAMICI. You are welcome.

I do want to remind my colleagues that, pursuant to Committee practice, materials for submission to the hearing record must be submitted to the Committee Clerk within 14 days following the last day of the hearing, so by the close of business on May 26, 2021, preferably in Microsoft Word format. The materials submitted must address the subject matter of the hearing. Only a Member of the Subcommittee or an invited witness may submit materials for inclusion into the hearing record. Documents are limited to 50 pages each. Documents longer than 50 pages will be incorporated into the record via an internet link that you must provide to the Committee Clerk within the required timeframe. So please recognize that in the future that link may no longer work.

Pursuant to House rules and regulations, items for the record should be submitted to the Clerk electronically by emailing submissions to edandlabor.hearings@mail.house.gov.

Again, I want to thank the witness for your participation today. Members of the Subcommittee may have some additional questions for you. We ask you to please respond to those questions in writing. The hearing record will be held open for 14 days to receive those responses.

I remind my colleagues that, pursuant to Committee practice, the questions for the hearing record must be submitted to the Majority Committee Staff or Committee Clerk within 7 days. The questions submitted must address the subject matter of the hearing.

And I now recognize the distinguished Ranking Member for a closing statement. You are muted, Mr. Fulcher.

Mr. FULCHER. OK. I have a touchy mute button, and so I apologize about that. But thank you for recognizing me.

Madam Chair, I have a report in front of me from the American Enterprise Institute, Reimagining School Meals for a Post-Pandemic Era. I would just like to enter that into the record if I may, please.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. Without objection.

Mr. FULCHER. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And Deputy Under Secretary Dean, thank you for joining us today. I just wanted to recap a couple of the points that were made today or that were brought up. First of all, just how important it is, whatever we have, that it is able to work actually on the ground and it works for our hardworking school officials, just because if it is not easy to implement, it is not going to be successful anyway.

We talked about strong accountability for these programs and the support for better nutrition education. That is just good for everyone.

There was a hesitation on a commitment to limiting the cost that schools will face. That is a supersensitive button, especially in my State and a lot of the Western States.

And just to underscore why, we struggle with our school funding probably more than most States do, simply because most of our land mass is federally owned. We don't have a broad-based property tax, which is a tool to often fund those mechanisms. There are other things that have been put in place, but nevertheless, it is just not the same as having a broad-based property tax. So the cost is
very, very sensitive. So our schools face enough challenges without adding to cost and unfunded mandates on that front.

So we did hear some positive news about just the commitment to work with us on these proposals so that it doesn’t get too layered and too complex. So thank you for that.

And just last, Madam Chair and Mrs. Dean, Congressman Fitzgerald from Wisconsin made I think some really good points. And in my State of Idaho, yes, we are known for potatoes, but we have got a strong dairy presence as well.

And recently, Secretary Vilsack said in Ag Subcommittee that the kids are not drinking the no-fat milk, but they are drinking the low-fat milk. And so I just want to point that out. It is important to have something that will actually be consumed and enjoyed.

Schools in my district have expressed concern also about the USDA guidelines being not particularly clear or flexible. And so any help that you can help us with on that would be much, much appreciated. And the need to continue to serve low-fat flavored milk is just very, very important.

With that, Madam Chair and Mrs. Dean, I thank you for the time for this hearing. I yield back.

Chairwoman BONAMICI. Thank you very much.

And I now recognize myself for the purpose of making a closing statement.

Deputy Under Secretary Dean, thank you again for being with us and for discussing the work that you and the Biden administration have done and will continue to do to expand access to the Child Nutrition Programs. We look forward to working with you.

Our discussion today was a stark reminder of the scale and severity of the child hunger crisis. And even as we recover from the pandemic, parents and families still face steep challenges putting food on the table. And without nutritious food, too many children are losing the critical foundation they need to succeed in school, lead a healthy life, and thrive.

But today, we also confirmed that the early relief we secured for school nutrition, the Childhood Nutrition Program took significant steps in the right direction. These investments helped put healthy food into the hands and the bellies of millions of children.

As we learned last week, hunger is now at its lowest since the pandemic began. We cannot abandon this meaningful progress. As elected leaders, we have the opportunity and truly the moral obligation to make sure that our Nation’s children do not go hungry. But we cannot fulfill that responsibility unless we come together to support the vital Nutrition Programs that are now sustaining millions of children.

I am very encouraged by the Ranking Member’s recognition of the importance of these Nutrition Programs. I do recall in prior hearings over the years learning from those experts on the ground, in the schools who are successfully implementing programs, for example, under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act standards. I look forward to the conversations about these, about the Farm to School Program, and all of the other issues that we discussed today.

So, Deputy Under Secretary Dean, we do look forward to working with you to make sure that the American Families Plan builds on our progress to expand nutrition assistance while also supporting
our local farmers. And I look forward to working with all my colleagues to provide our children with nutritious food that will fuel their health and development.

If there is no further business, without objection, I yield back, and the Subcommittee stands adjourned. Thank you, everyone.

[Additional submission by Ranking Member Fulcher follow:]

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Report

Reimagining school meals for a post-pandemic era

American Enterprise Institute

POVERTY STUDIES

Angela Rachidi

February 22, 2021

Key Points

- The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides millions of school meals to low-income children each year, but long-term concerns remain regarding the program’s stigma, integrity, and overall nutritional value.

- The health and safety challenges introduced by this pandemic offer an opportunity for a new approach to the NSLP, both in the near and long term.

- Restructuring the NSLP into an electronic benefit program would address the immediate health and safety needs introduced by the pandemic and help resolve long-term problems with the program.
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Introduction
The federal government created the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in 1946. Since then, the program has provided free or reduced-price lunches (and eventually breakfast) to millions of schoolchildren across the country, in partnership with states and schools. Before the pandemic, schools
largely provided meals through a cafeteria model, with children collecting their meals in food lines and then sitting shoulder to shoulder to eat. This delivery method for school meals is no longer health and safety-appropriate amid the pandemic, which presents an opportunity to revisit the program’s overall design and delivery model.

The pandemic has also required schools to change their instructional models. Some are offering blended models that combine in-school learning with online learning. At times, in-person instruction must go virtual to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, which means many schoolchildren have not been consistently in school for meals five days a week.\(^2\) Further, although research shows that COVID-19 transmission in schools has been low, the pandemic has increased awareness of the dangers of illnesses more broadly, and some schools might prefer never to return to self-service, cafeteria-style meals given the risks.

If concerns about the NSLP centered on only operations during a pandemic, long-term structural changes to the program would seem unnecessary. However, long-standing concerns over program stigma and integrity also exist—including well-known challenges associated with providing nutritious options in the structure and cost constraints of the current program. New technologies and food distribution options are available to schools, but they do not fit in the current NSLP framework. The pandemic has presented an opportunity to reimagine the NSLP and develop a policy solution to long-term challenges facing the program. Although challenges exist, the rollout of the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program in recent months has shown that moving the NSLP to an electronic benefit program could address the immediate crisis, offer more flexibility to schools, and address some of the long-term issues with the NSLP, such as stigma, integrity, and nutritional value.

Read the full report.

Notes


Additional submission by Mrs. Foxx follow:

INFANT NUTRITION COUNCIL OF AMERICA
Written Statement for the Record
Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee
Examining the Policies and Priorities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and
Nutrition Service
Subcommittee Hearing
May 12, 2021

The Infant Nutrition Council of America (INCA) is an association of manufacturers of infant
formulas and toddler milks. Our members are Abbott Nutrition, Gerber Products
Company, Perrigo Nutritional and Mead Johnson Nutrition/Regrett. INCA members provide
between $1.5-$2.0 billion annually in infant formula rebates. We have a strong and vested
interest in working with Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ensure that the
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) is
administered effectively in a manner that ensures infant safety, health and well-being and that
program integrity is strictly maintained.

For many of the 1.55 million infants enrolled in WIC, infant formula is a sole source of nutrition
or used as an important nutritional supplement to breastfeeding. The safety and proper
nourishment of all babies who consume our products is our highest priority. Infant safety
requires formula to be sold through authorized distribution channels by reputable retailers who
adhere to all program regulations governing the sale and distribution of infant formula.
Unfortunately, recent press reports and enforcement actions demonstrate more stringent
oversight is required to ensure infant safety and to increase program integrity.

INCA has outlined several priorities that we believe will improve the program and protect the
health and well-being of infants. These priorities include:

**Strengthening existing policies for WIC retailer audits.**

- To ensure the safety and quality of infant formula products available to WIC families,
  increased oversight of WIC retailers is necessary to ensure compliance with
  Congressional mandates and program requirements. USDA should be required to develop
  specific retail inventory audit and other compliance requirements that must be
  implemented by all WIC State Agencies. USDA should also establish a process for
  assembling and sharing best practices developed by innovative State Agencies aimed at
  combating program noncompliance and other program integrity issues to ensure infant
  safety.

**Providing accurate and timely compliance information.**

- Congress should require WIC State Agencies to provide accurate and timely compliance
  information (i.e., noncompliance, recovery) to USDA and to contract holders when
  appropriate. This will improve data sharing, communication and efficiencies within the
  established annual compliance activities of State Agencies, and to infant formula rebate
  contract holders.
Improving the WIC public-private partnership contract process.

- Improving the WIC public-private partnership contracting process to align more closely with government contracting norms will ensure the standardization of WIC contract terms and conditions, and hold all contract participants to the highest ethical, transparent, and legal standards.

Infant formula manufacturers are dedicated to ensuring that WIC is administered efficiently and effectively to the benefit of its consumers. INCA members strongly believe that all infants deserve quality nutritional support, as established by the U.S. Infant Formula Act, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, irrespective of program participation. We look forward to working with the Committee to strengthen the program for the safety and well-being of infants and to ensure program integrity.
PREVENTING LUNCH SHAMING: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Unpaid meal charges represent a challenging issue directly impacting schools and the children they serve. Schools must balance the desire to provide for hungry children with the importance of "staying in the black." Instances where children are punished for meal charges are not the norm, but USDA is aware that "lunch shaming" occurs in some schools. USDA has consistently discouraged these tactics. This resource provides strategies schools can use to prevent lunch shaming through their communication methods.

FOCUS ON ADULTS RESPONSIBLE FOR PAYMENT

USDA recommends schools focus on the adult(s) responsible for providing funds for meal purchases, rather than focusing debt collection efforts on the child. We encourage schools to communicate respectfully, privately, and directly with adults via phone, text, and/or email. This is preferred to communicating with or through the child, as the child may be embarrassed if communication about lunch debt occurs in front of their peers. Schools are strongly discouraged from directing any potentially stigmatising communication towards a child. For example, USDA discourages the use of hand stamps, stickers, or other visual markers to identify children with lunch debt.

CHOOSE DISCRETE PAYMENT REMINDER OPTIONS

Proactively reminding families of low account balances is a best practice in many schools. USDA recommends choosing payment reminder options that will not single out children with lunch debt in the classroom or cafeteria. The following strategies are available to schools:

- Written reminders, sent to a parent/guardian email account or home address
- Verbal reminders, communicated through a "robo-call" system or a personal telephone call
- Automated reminders, sent through an online payment system
- Written reminders sent home in a student folder or an unmarked envelope with other school reminders or notices

COMMUNICATE REGULARLY WITH ALL FAMILIES

At a minimum, school food authorities are required to share information about their meal charge policy on an annual basis. USDA encourages schools to share this information regularly and in a variety of ways. Schools should post the policy on their web and social media sites, include the policy in print and online versions of student handbooks, and include the policy in other written communications to families, such as in monthly school newsletters and on cafeteria menus.

WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE?

USDA is working hard to provide State and local officials with all the support and resources they need to ensure they succeed in developing fair, sustainable, and transparent policies to navigate situations where children do not have funds to pay for their meal. Visit https://www.fns.usda.gov/meal-meals/unpaid-meal-charges to find policy guidance, webinars, handbooks, trainings, checklists, and more!

USDA is an Equal Opportunity Provider, Employer, and Lender.
UNPAID MEAL CHARGES

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs provide children with nutritious meals during the school day. Families participating at the reduced or paid rate are expected to pay for their children’s meals. When a child does not have the funds needed to pay for their meal, it is a difficult situation for both the child and the school. USDA is committed to working with local officials to minimize the impact of unpaid meal charges on participating children and on their bottom line.

WHAT DOES USDA REQUIRE?

USDA does not impose a “one-size-fits-all” policy for handling unpaid meals. We believe local communities are best positioned to determine how to manage the problem based on their unique needs and available resources. We require school food authorities to develop and communicate a policy for handling unpaid meal charges, but allow local officials to define how the policy works. Developing and clearly communicating a meal charge policy prevents confusion for families and gives local officials leverage to address the issue.

CAN STATES DEVELOP A MEAL CHARGE POLICY?

Yes. While USDA’s requirement applies to the school food authority, we give States discretion to develop an unpaid meal charge policy to be implemented by all school food authorities throughout the State.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO ABOUT “LUNCH SHAMING”?

USDA is aware of rare instances of “lunch shaming,” or practices that embarrass children who are unable to pay for a meal. USDA strongly discourages “lunch shaming” tactics, such as denying children meals, requiring children to work for meals, or using hand stamps or stickers to identify children with meal charges.

Instead, USDA promotes best practices including:

- Ensuring eligible children are certified for free or reduced price meals
- Offering families multiple payment options, including online payment
- Reminding families of low account balances through discreet methods such as calls, texts, and emails sent directly to the parent/guardian

WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE?

USDA is working hard to provide State and local officials with all the support and resources they need to ensure they succeed in developing fair, sustainable, and transparent policies to navigate situations where children do not have funds to pay for their meal. Visit https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/unpaid-meal-charges to find policy guidance, webinars, handbooks, trainings, checklists, and more!

USDA is an Equal Opportunity Provider, Employer and Lender
[Questions submitted for the record and the responses by Deputy Under Secretary Dean follow:]

May 20, 2021

The Honorable Stacy Dean  
Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Deputy Under Secretary Dean:

I would like to thank you for testifying at the May 12, 2021 Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services at the hearing entitled “Examining the Policies and Priorities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition.”

Please find enclosed additional questions submitted by Committee members following the hearing. Please provide a written response no later than Thursday, May 27, 2021, for inclusion in the official hearing record. Your responses should be sent to Mariah Mowbray and Ali Hard of the Committee staff. They can be contacted at 202-225-3725 should you have any questions.

I appreciate your time and continued contribution to the work of the Committee.

Sincerely,

ROBERT C. “BOBBY” SCOTT  
Chairman

Enclosure
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services Hearing
“Examining the Policies and Priorities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition”
Wednesday, May 12, 2021
10:15 a.m. (Eastern Time)

Chair Suzanne Bonamici (D – OR)

1. President Biden’s American Families Plan would provide $1 billion for a “healthy foods incentive demonstration” to build on progress made to improve the nutrition standards of school meals. This proposal supports schools adopting “specified measures that exceed current school meal standards” by providing “an enhanced reimbursement as an incentive.” What will the USDA recommend regarding use of the funding, and are there any efforts that will incentivize schools to exceed the current nutrition standards in areas like added sugars and sodium?

2. We have heard from nutrition experts and school nutrition professionals that technical assistance and incentives are key to getting students, schools, and industry to support strong nutrition standards. How could USDA support adoption of strong standards or provide technical assistance for each of these groups in connection with providing meals that align with the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans? Are there other solutions beyond incentives or technical assistance that USDA would recommend?

Ranking Member Virginia Foxx (R – NC)

1. According to USDA data, from 2012 to 2018 overall participation in school lunches decreased every year, but the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-priced meals increased. Specifically, participation was as follows:
   - 2010: 17.6% free, 3.8% reduced, 11.1% full. Total 31.8m, 5.28b total lunches. 65.3 percent free and reduced participation.
   - 2012: 18.7m free, 2.7m reduced, 10.2m full. Total 31.7m, 5.21b total lunches served, 68.2 percent free and reduced participation.
   - 2015: 19.8m free, 2.2m reduced, 8.5m full. Total 30.5m, 5b total lunches served, 72.6 percent free and reduced participation.
   - 2018: 20.2m free, 1.8m reduced, 7.7m full. Total 29.7m, 4.87b meals served, 74.4 percent free and reduced.

   Other than talking about providing free meals, please describe what efforts USDA is making to help make the food program something all students want to participate in, not just those students who cannot afford to buy a meal someplace else or bring their own lunch or breakfast?

2. The WIC program relies heavily on the infant formula companies to provide subsidies through the rebate program. There is an integrity issue and a safety issue that Congress has been made aware of. There are documented stories about stores buying stolen or
expired formula from sources other than the manufacturer. This is not only an integrity issue because the companies are asked to reimburse for cans they did not sell, but more importantly it is a safety issue for the mothers purchasing that formula. What is USDA doing to address this issue? How are you working with the inspector general to help stop this from happening?

3. I’m concerned about the reluctance of USDA to support the Meals to You program. Last summer, this program supported delivering food to kids in need in 43 states, and specifically helped low-income children in rural communities access food. EBT, while successful for some families does not specifically help rural families. Please provide information on what efforts USDA is taking to reach children in rural communities and why Meals to You is not a model that will continue.

4. During the hearing there was a discussion about how there is not actual food waste in the school meal program. However, a USDA study actually found that there was plate waste. ([https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study](https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study)) That study found that in the school lunch program “waste was highest for vegetables—an average of 31 percent of the vegetables on observed lunch trays was wasted, followed by milk (29 percent), fruits and 100% fruit juice (26 percent), and separate or side grains/ breads (23 percent). Mean levels of waste were lower for desserts and other menu items (20 percent), and lowest for entries and meat/meat alternates (16 and 14 percent, respectively).” The report found that one of the factors contributing to waste was the offer vs. serve requirement. It is imperative that USDA consider the facts when crafting new rules and policy proposals and not try to spin or pivot to other data that may seem friendly to the desired policy. What is USDA going to do to help eliminate plate waste in the school meal programs?

5. Please provide the data for each week, by state since March 2020 on the issuance amount compared to the redemption rate for SNAP and separately for P-EBT.

**Representative Glenn Thompson (R-PA)**

As the member from Pennsylvania’s Fifteenth Congressional District, which covers 14 counties and nearly 25 percent of the landmass of Pennsylvania, I represent many dairy farms. As such, I am a strong advocate for them and continue to find ways to bring dairy varieties back into school lunches.

As you know, milk is the No.1 source of nine essential nutrients in young Americans’ diets, and provides multiple health benefits, including not limited to better bone health, lower blood pressure, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, and Type 2 diabetes. No other beverage comes close to this level of natural nutritional value.

However, from 2014 to 2016, schools served 213 million fewer half-pints of milk, despite the fact public school enrollment was growing. Given the nutritional value of milk, and the fact young minds need to be well nourished to perform at their best, this is cause for concern.
In December of 2018, the USDA announced a final rule to broaden milk options in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program by allowing schools to offer flavored, low-fat (1%) milk, rather than only fat-free milk.

While I was extremely pleased to see this, there is more work to be done.

- Ms. Dean, what do you believe are the next steps to ensure schools continue to provide more milk choices for students, including whole milk?

As you may know, the USDA’s Economic Research Service just released a report showing federal spending on food assistance reached a record high of over $122 billion in 2020.

- Can you please tell us all of the programs available for those needing assistance?

- With all of the assistance and programs available you mentioned, what efforts is USDA taking to streamline and focus these programs so we are eliminating hunger and its symptoms rather than just increasing the number of assistance programs?

Lastly, I wanted to talk about school lunch equipment and how it relates to healthy meals. According to the results of the 2019 USDA’s Meal Cost study, there has been a significant increase in the dietary quality of school meals. While I was pleased to see this, I was a bit concerned local education agencies (LEAs) did report challenges with meeting nutrition standards. These issues ranged from cost of food and equipment to need for staff training.

- What is USDA doing to provide LEAs with the proper technical assistance to overcome these challenges?
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services Hearing

“Examining the Policies and Priorities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition”

Wednesday, May 12, 2021
10:15 a.m. (Eastern Time)

Questions for the Record

Chair Suzanne Bonamici (D – OR)

1. President Biden’s American Families Plan would provide $1 billion for a “healthy foods incentive demonstration” to build on progress made to improve the nutrition standards of school meals. This proposal supports schools adopting “specified measures that exceed current school meal standards” by providing “an enhanced reimbursement as an incentive.” What will the USDA recommend regarding use of the funding, and are there any efforts that will incentivize schools to exceed the current nutrition standards in areas like added sugars and sodium?

Response: Building on progress made on improving the nutrition standards of school meals, the American Families Plan includes a new $1 billion demonstration initiative to support schools in expanding their healthy food offerings and text strategies for encouraging healthy lifestyles in the school environment. With this funding, schools could receive financial incentives to adopt healthy practices that go above and beyond the required meal standards. This could include things like: using more scratch cooking, limiting added sugar, allowing adequate time for meals at appropriate meal times, increasing time for physical activity, including food preparation in curriculum, increasing local and culturally appropriate foods, or sourcing ingredients from disadvantaged producers, to name a few.

USDA will seek stakeholder input regarding the strategies, interventions, and measures that would be most appropriate, as well as possible opportunities to strengthen the school nutrition environment. USDA will work with states and schools to evaluate the impact of these efforts on school meal participation, educational outcomes, and overall well-being. Integrating a strong commitment to healthy eating into the core mission of schools is an investment in the health and well-being of the next generation. Providing children with healthy food at school and the tools to choose healthy diets will improve their quality of life and lay the foundation for a lifetime of healthy eating.

2. We have heard from nutrition experts and school nutrition professionals that technical assistance and incentives are key to getting started, schools, and industry to support strong nutrition standards. How could USDA support adoption of strong standards or provide technical assistance for each of these groups in connection with providing meals that align with the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans? Are there other solutions beyond incentives or technical assistance that USDA would recommend?

Response: USDA recognizes the importance of working with schools and industry stakeholders and are committed to supporting schools in meeting nutrition standards through ongoing training, technical
assistance, and outreach efforts. Moving the needle on nutrition requires a multi-faceted approach that includes strong standards, training and technical assistance to help schools prepare healthy meals kids will eat, and working with industry to ensure schools can purchase food to meet nutrition standards in a way that children will enjoy.

In addition to the Administration’s Healthy Incentive Fund proposal, described in detail above, which will provide incentives for schools to go beyond the required meal standards, USDA’s Team Nutrition effort supports Child Nutrition Program operators in meeting nutrition standards by: 1) providing training and technical assistance to food service staff who prepare meals for CN programs; 2) developing nutrition education resources that help children learn about agriculture and make informed food choices; and 3) providing program operators with resources to support healthy school and child care environments. The Team Nutrition initiative helps States and local program operators apply meal pattern requirements to their school and child care menus, while accommodating local and regional food preferences and optimizing the use of USDA Foods and locally produced foods. Team Nutrition currently maintains a network of Team Nutrition Schools that have affirmed their commitment to helping students make healthier food choices and be more physically active, and in turn they have the opportunity to collaborate with other Team Nutrition Schools and receive special nutrition education and promotion materials.

USDA also works closely with allied organizations to ensure understanding of the meal standards and offers technical assistance. As part of USDA’s cooperative agreement with the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN), the ICN maintains a National Advisory Council to hear from a diverse range of Child Nutrition stakeholders (e.g., school nutrition program directors, industry, higher education, allied organizations, and State agencies) about their educational, training, and technical assistance needs and their recommendations about resources and services that are most useful to Child Nutrition Programs.

In addition to incentives or technical assistance, nutrition education for students and training and resources for Child Nutrition Program operators supports the successful adoption of strong meal standards. Trained school nutrition staff can better plan and prepare meals that meet the nutrition standards and are appealing to students, while maintaining financially viable school meals programs, and engaged students with nutrition knowledge are better able to make healthy choices in the cafeteria.

**Ranking Member Virginia Foxx (R-NC)**

1. According to USDA data, from 2012 to 2018 overall participation in school lunches decreased every year, but the percentage of students receiving free and reduced-priced meals increased. Specifically, participation was as follows:
   - 2010: 17.6m free, 3.0m reduced, 11.1m full. Total 31.8m, 5.2% total lunches, 65.3% percent free and reduced participation.
   - 2012: 18.7m free, 2.7m reduced, 19.2m full. Total 31.7m, 5.2% total lunches served, 68.2% percent free and reduced participation.
   - 2015: 19.8m free, 2.2m reduced, 8.5m full. Total 30.5m, 5% total lunches served, 72.6% percent free and reduced participation.
   - 2018: 20.2m free, 1.8m reduced, 7.7m full. Total 29.7m, 4.8% meals served, 74.4% percent free and reduced.
Other than talking about providing free meals, please describe what efforts USDA is making to help make the food program something all students want to participate in, not just those students who cannot afford to buy a meal somewhere else or bring their own lunch or breakfast?

**Response:** One important factor in increasing participation is helping schools make healthy food that kids enjoy. Under the FY 2011 Team Nutrition Training Grants for School Meal Development, so far 15 States are developing 170 new nutritious and appetizing recipes that incorporate local agricultural products and appeal to students’ taste preferences, and additional awards are forthcoming. The school meal recipes States develop under these grants will utilize foods produced across America and its territories; these recipes will be posted to USDA’s Team Nutrition website as well as on the Institute of Child Nutrition’s (ICN) Child Nutrition Recipe Box.

In addition, USDA is working cooperatively with the ICN to develop training resources and conduct trainings to equip Child Nutrition Program operators with essential job skills such as menu planning, procurement of goods and services, financial management, leadership, and culinary skills. The New Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition (CICN) maintains a website that houses an online information center providing school nutrition program operators access to valuable culinary resources. These resources help program operators plan and prepare appealing meals for students and thereby help increase program participation. The CICN also has a series of short culinary videos and has launched monthly webinars that focus on various culinary topics and strategies that will enhance the overall cafeteria experience and help increase program participation. Moreover, a new podcast series features interviews with school nutrition program chefs from around the country, which provides listeners an inside scoop into their kitchen operations to see how they are inspiring child nutrition.

2. The WIC program relies heavily on the infant formula companies to provide subsidies through the rebate program. There is an integrity issue and a safety issue that Congress has been made aware of. There are documented stories about stores buying stolen or expired formula from sources other than the manufacturer. This is not only an integrity issue because the companies are asked to reimburse for cans they did not sell, but more importantly it is a safety issue for the mothers purchasing that formula. What is USDA doing to address this issue? How are you working with the inspector general to help stop this from happening?

**Response:** In order to safeguard the health of WIC infants and to limit the risk of stolen and/or adulterated infant formula being sold to WIC participants, USDA requires WIC State agencies to take multiple oversight steps to ensure that WIC authorized vendors stock and sell infant formula purchased from legitimate, licensed sources.

At least annually, WIC State agencies must compile and distribute a list of the names and addresses of infant formula wholesalers, distributors, and retailers licensed in the State in accordance with State law (including regulations), and infant formula manufacturers registered with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to WIC authorized vendors. This helps vendors find legitimate infant formula suppliers and avoid inadvertently contacting an unlicensed business.

WIC State agencies must also notify vendors that they can only purchase infant formula from sources included on the list, and the State agencies are required to cover this requirement in all annually-
required vendor trainings. Under Federal regulations, a State agency may only authorize a vendor applicant if the State can verify the applicant obtains its supply of infant formula exclusively from approved sources. To ensure ongoing compliance, WIC State agencies require vendors to maintain documentation of their infant formula purchases and make such records available to the State agency upon request.

Additionally, WIC State agencies review each vendor’s infant formula stock during routine monitoring visits, and conduct inventory audits on infant formula to ensure the infant formula that the vendor reports being sold to WIC participants was purchased from the list of licensed suppliers.

WIC State agencies must terminate the vendor agreement of any WIC authorized vendor who was identified to be purchasing infant formula from sources not on the list. Beyond termination of the vendor agreement, WIC State agencies have the discretion to establish Program sanctions, i.e., disqualifications, civil money penalties assessed in lieu of disqualification, and administrative fines, for vendors who are obtaining infant formula from unlicensed sources.

USDA supports WIC State agencies in these efforts by providing a list of infant formula manufacturers registered with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and providing technical assistance to WIC State agencies on the creation and ongoing maintenance of the list, and best practices for the verification of vendors’ invoices during routine monitoring visits and compliance investigations.

USDA further ensures that WIC State agencies implement and enforce the required regulations by conducting Management Evaluations of WIC State agencies, during which Federal reviewers review each State’s infant formula supplier list and their vendor authorization and vendor oversight policies, including the verification of infant formula suppliers.

Finally, USDA encourages WIC State agencies to include an Office of Inspector General (OIG) Hotline phone number and web address on all WIC food instruments, to allow participants to report incidents of suspected fraud, waste and abuse easily. FNS works with USDA’s OIG, to investigate and resolve any complaints reported via the OIG Hotline.

3. I’m concerned about the reluctance of USDA to support the Meals to You program. Last summer, this program supported delivering food to kids in need in 43 states, and specifically helped low-income children in rural communities access food. I want to make sure that we are successful, and that we can sustain this effort beyond this summer. What is USDA doing to support rural families and why Meals to You is not a model that will continue?

Response: USDA is committed to ensuring people in sparsely populated communities have access to nutritious food. We will continue to operate the Summer Meals-To-You demonstration project this summer, and we expect to have evaluation results for both Summer Meals-to-You and Emergency Meals-to-You in 2022.

USDA launched the Summer Meals To You (MTY) demonstration in Fiscal Year 2019 through a grant to the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty (BCHP) for summers 2019 to 2021. In 2019,
Summer MTY served five Texas counties where traditional congregate summer meals programs were either not offered or not accessible for all or part of the summer. Approximately 4,000 children received weekly meal boxes in summer 2019. MTY was expanded in 2020 to serve rural areas with limited access to summer meals programs in New Mexico and Alaska, and continued in Texas. Approximately 4,000 children received Summer MTY meal boxes in 2020. In summer 2021, summer MTY will continue to serve rural and remote areas in Alaska, New Mexico, and Texas.

The Emergency Meals to You Program was launched to meet an urgent and acute need for nutrition assistance in the summer of 2020, as COVID-19 dramatically disrupted normal summer feeding efforts. Emergency MTY provided boxed meals to eligible children by mail and operated in rural areas impacted by COVID-19 school closures. The Emergency MTY grant will not be renewed for summer 2021, but USDA is engaging with Baylor on options to expand the Summer Meals to You demonstration.

The nutrition assistance landscape will look very different in summer 2021, compared to last summer. States may offer Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), which provides food dollars to families to all children eligible for free and reduced-price meals nationwide, and waivers will afford significant flexibilities for local program operators to serve summer meals in a way that meets the needs of their communities.

Although USDA will not operate Emergency MTY this summer, the Department recognizes the potential of this model and is working to evaluate boxed meal delivery approach to summer feeding through the Summer MTY demonstration and have solicited ideas to meet the needs of individuals in remote areas. In addition, three Indian Tribal Organizations are operating Summer EBT demonstration projects in summer 2021, serving low-income children in rural areas that are historically underserved by Federal, state, and local summer nutrition assistance efforts.

4. During the hearing there was a discussion about how there is not actual food waste in the school meal program. However, a USDA study actually found that there was plate waste. ([https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study](https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study)) That study found that in the school lunch program “waste was highest for vegetables—an average of 31 percent of leafy vegetables on observed lunch trays was wasted, followed by milk (29 percent), fruits and 100% fruit juice (26 percent), and separate or side grains/breads (23 percent). Mean levels of waste were lower for desserts and other menu items (20 percent), and lowest for entries and meats/meat alternates (16 and 14 percent, respectively).” The report found that one of the factors contributing to waste was the offer vs. serve requirement. It is imperative that USDA consider the facts when crafting new rules and policy proposals and not try to spin or pivot to other data that may seem friendly to the desired policy. What is USDA going to do to help eliminate plate waste in the school meal programs?

Response: FNS takes the issue of food waste seriously and has taken concrete steps to reduce waste in our nutrition programs. The School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study found that students who ate a school lunch did not always eat all of the foods provided—on average, about one-fifth of calories available. Waste was highest for vegetables, milk, and fruit, and lowest for desserts and entrees. At the same time,
students who ate school lunches were more likely to consume milk, fruits, and vegetables at lunch, than students who ate food from home or other places.

The same study found that the use of the offer-versus-serve (OVVS) option was associated with significantly lower levels of plate waste among elementary schools. OVVS at lunch was associated with significantly lower percentages of waste for calories (26 percent versus 32 percent) and fruits and vegetables (24 percent versus 35 percent). Offer Versus Serve helps students and cafeteria staff move cafeteria lines quickly, and allows students to choose what they want to eat for lunch and breakfast, thereby helping to reduce food waste.

USDA’s Team Nutrition has several resources available to help schools reduce food waste, including posters for students, tip sheets for school meal professionals, and a publication “What You Can Do to Prevent Wasted Food” for school meal programs, which school nutrition professionals, parents, students, teachers, and school administrators can use to help reduce, recover, and recycle food to reduce food waste.

Team Nutrition also has a vast collection of recipes and cookbooks featuring delicious, kid-approved recipes that incorporate whole grains, beans/legumes, and vegetables. These recipes have been standardized to ensure consistent yields, and thereby reduce food waste. Many of these recipes are available in Spanish; and large quantity USDA recipes can be found on the Institute of Child Nutrition’s Child Nutrition Recipe Box website. Team Nutrition also has resources available that can help school nutrition professionals highlight menu items and enhance the appeal of menu items on their serving lines. One resource is the Team Nutrition Popular Events Idea Booklet, which includes creative ideas and how-to instructions for over 20 themed events, such as a “Try Day” taste-testing event to promote vegetables or other food items on the school menu, thereby increasing student acceptance and reducing plate waste.

5. Please provide the data for each week, by state since March 2020 on the issuance amount compared to the redemption rate for SNAP and separately for P-EBT.

Response:

Redemption Data: USDA does not receive redemption data broken out between P-EBT and SNAP, and totals can only be provided on a monthly basis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Combined SNAP and P-EBT Redemptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2020</td>
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<td>July 2020</td>
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<td>August 2020</td>
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<td>October 2020</td>
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<td>November 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Issuance Data:** SNAP and P-EBT issuance data since March 2020 is provided. There is one critical caveat to note for P-EBT. States have issued lump sums covering multiple months of benefits, so the monthly issuance amounts are not particularly meaningful. For example, many States were approved in December 2019 and January 2020 but began issuing benefits in February 2021 in one lump sum to cover the months from September 2020 through February 2021, which results in a spike in February 2021 issuances.
### SNAP Participation and Cost (excluding FSBT)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal Year and Month</th>
<th>Participation Household</th>
<th>Participation Persons</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mar '20</td>
<td>19,050,654</td>
<td>37,296,089</td>
<td>5,303,133,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr '20</td>
<td>21,027,730</td>
<td>41,022,627</td>
<td>7,844,002,092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May '20</td>
<td>21,076,113</td>
<td>42,796,742</td>
<td>7,991,864,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun '20</td>
<td>22,395,704</td>
<td>43,022,977</td>
<td>7,917,214,384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul '20</td>
<td>22,163,454</td>
<td>42,699,856</td>
<td>7,997,991,942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug '20</td>
<td>22,443,142</td>
<td>42,460,695</td>
<td>7,710,071,251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep '20</td>
<td>22,611,609</td>
<td>42,517,187</td>
<td>7,996,302,943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct '20</td>
<td>21,643,656</td>
<td>41,076,308</td>
<td>7,874,305,563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov '20</td>
<td>21,572,374</td>
<td>41,451,351</td>
<td>7,801,294,237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec '20</td>
<td>21,062,200</td>
<td>41,586,646</td>
<td>7,791,847,496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan '21</td>
<td>21,647,560</td>
<td>41,050,315</td>
<td>7,916,057,073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb '21</td>
<td>21,690,110</td>
<td>42,023,586</td>
<td>8,094,025,424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>21,660,224</strong></td>
<td><strong>41,730,518</strong></td>
<td><strong>92,021,530,318</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: P(E)BT Fisher: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Food Stamp Benefits) - FSBT/SNAP Participation and Expenditures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal Year and Month</th>
<th>Participation Household</th>
<th>Participation Persons</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mar '20</td>
<td>1,966,247</td>
<td>3,597,053</td>
<td>562,179,791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr '20</td>
<td>2,116,379</td>
<td>3,947,965</td>
<td>450,963,925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May '20</td>
<td>2,477,926</td>
<td>4,916,976</td>
<td>514,990,246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun '20</td>
<td>2,602,611</td>
<td>5,287,976</td>
<td>526,321,976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul '20</td>
<td>2,362,792</td>
<td>5,520,603</td>
<td>526,754,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug '20</td>
<td>1,697,154</td>
<td>2,948,198</td>
<td>528,985,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep '20</td>
<td>7,428,797</td>
<td>11,193,921</td>
<td>1,993,944,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct '20</td>
<td>46,073</td>
<td>76,243</td>
<td>10,938,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov '20</td>
<td>210,222</td>
<td>309,638</td>
<td>21,269,762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec '20</td>
<td>846,440</td>
<td>1,218,201</td>
<td>112,795,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan '21</td>
<td>568,074</td>
<td>1,141,730</td>
<td>84,946,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb '21</td>
<td>2,497,535</td>
<td>2,043,256</td>
<td>427,533,514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12,107,098</strong></td>
<td><strong>23,600,537</strong></td>
<td><strong>991,219,538</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. P(E)BT/SNAP may include statistics on recipient data traditionally categorized as “Other” such as system task loads and retail traffic information.

### Representative Glenn Thompson (R-PA)

1. As the member from Pennsylvania’s Fifteenth Congressional District, which covers 14 counties and nearly 25 percent of the landmass of Pennsylvania, I represent many dairy farms. As such, I stand strongly with them and continue to work towards bringing dairy variety back into school lunches. As you know, milk is the No.1 source of nine essential nutrients in young Americans’ diets, and provides multiple health benefits, including but not limited to better bone health.
health, lower blood pressure, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, and Type 2 diabetes. No other beverage comes close to this level of natural nutritional value. However, from 2014 to 2016, schools served 213 million fewer half-pints of milk, despite the fact public school enrollment was growing. Given the nutritional value of milk, and the fact young minds need to be well nourished to perform at their best, this is cause for concern.

2. December of 2018, the USDA announced a final rule to broaden milk options in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program by allowing schools to offer flavored, low-fat (1%) milk, rather than only fat-free milk. While I was extremely pleased to see this, there is more work to be done. Ms. Dean, what do you believe are the next steps to ensure schools continue to provide more milk choices for students, including whole milk?

Response to R1 and R2: Consuming dairy products like milk provides important health benefits. Milk provides nutrients that are vital for health including calcium, potassium, vitamin D, and protein. School meal patterns require fluid milk to be offered at every breakfast and lunch service. Through the Team Nutrition initiative, USDA continues to share information with families about the benefits of milk as part of school breakfast (https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/plate-guide-school-breakfast) and lunch (https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/plate-guide-school-lunch). Nutrition education materials for schools also include a focus on milk, including this Discover MyPlate emergent reader for kindergartens: https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/0630_OMP_EK_Dairy_6215.pdf. The Administration is fully committed to strong nutrition standards. Since the meal standards were revised after the last Child Nutrition Reauthorization, school meals have become healthier and children are eating better in schools. We also understand that schools need time to implement healthier meal standards and may need short-term continued flexibility as they work toward safely reopening schools. We have provided near-term flexibilities for next school year to support schools as they reopen.

3. As you may know, the USDA’s Economic Research Service just released a report showing federal spending on food assistance reached a record high of over $122 billion in 2020. Can you please tell us all of the programs available for those needing assistance? With all of the assistance and programs available you mentioned, what efforts is USDA taking to streamline and focus these programs so we are eliminating hunger and its symptoms rather than just increasing the number of assistance programs?

Response: Our country faced an extraordinary crisis over the past year, which warranted an extraordinary response. I applaud Congress for acting quickly to provide EFS with the authorities and resources to serve those in need. The hunger crisis has been one of the pandemic’s most insidious effects. Households with as many as 30 million adults and 14 million children have reported that they don’t have enough to eat, and food insecurity disproportionately impacts communities of color.

While food insecurity is damaging for people of all ages, research tells us that experiencing food insecurity during early childhood leads to especially detrimental and potentially life-long impacts. With schools and child care closed, it was even more critical to reach families struggling to put food on the table.
We are beginning to see signs that the extraordinary efforts we have undertaken together are providing relief to struggling Americans. According to the latest Census Pulse data, in April, just over 8 percent of adults reported sometimes or often not having enough to eat in the last 7 days, down from 14 percent in December. While we are starting to see improvement, 17 million adults are still struggling with hunger.

The ERS report highlights the temporary increase in spending on food and nutrition assistance programs, reflecting the significant increase in need for food assistance during the pandemic. ERS points to increased spending in two new programs—the P-EBT program created by Congress and the temporary Farmers to Families Food Box Program, which is currently being phased out—as well as increased spending in SNAP, which is designed to expand in economic downturns, as drivers. Additional SNAP benefits provided by Congress to address the hunger crisis will end once the public health declarations are lifted at the federal and state levels and the program will contract as economic conditions improve, by design. Additional programs like the Farmers to Families Food Box Program were launched to respond to unprecedented circumstances, but this program was designed and funded to be temporary. I agree that our objective should be to ensure that the core nutrition assistance programs are designed to be flexible and responsive to rapidly emerging needs, and we are working to take what we have learned from Farmers to Families and incorporate it into our core programs. We are focused on addressing hunger and nutrition insecurity through efficient, effective, and accountable programs, and I look forward to working with you as we do that.

USDA’s response to the COVID-19 public health emergency and our ability to be flexible and meet the emerging need for food assistance during this time. USDA is committed to administering its programs in the most efficient way, and in a manner that best addresses the needs of the people we serve, and we have pivoted to meet the COVID moment and help support recovery. In a typical year, USDA’s nutrition assistance programs touch the lives of one in four Americans each year, from infants to the elderly, and the pandemic has underscored how essential these programs are to ensure that Americans in need have access to nutritious food. It has also highlighted the opportunity to lay the foundation for a recovery that is more equitable and just for all Americans, and we look forward to working with Congress to do that.

4. Lastly, I wanted to talk about school lunch equipment and how it relates to healthy meals. According to the results of the 2019 USDA’s Meal Cost study, there has been significant increase in the dietary quality of school meals. While I was pleased to see this, I was a bit concerned local education agencies (LEAs) did report challenges with meeting nutrition standards, these issues ranged from cost of food and equipment to need for staff training. What is USDA doing to provide LEAs with the proper technical assistance to overcome these challenges?

Response: Properly equipping school foodservice facilities and the professionals who work in them is critical to ensuring that the school meals prepared for our nation’s children are appealing, nutritious, and safe. Over the past several years, Congress has appropriated funding on an annual basis for the NSLP Equipment Assistance Grants. USDA allocates these funds to State agencies for subgrants to local educational agencies and schools for the purchase of kitchen equipment, with a value of greater than $1,000, needed to serve healthier meals, improve food safety, and to help support the establishment, maintenance, or expansion of the school breakfast program.
FNS plans to release an additional $30 million in VSLP Equipment Assistance Grant funding soon. These monies were appropriated by Congress for FY 2021. In addition, the Administration’s American Jobs Plan proposes an additional $500 million over the next 5 years to support foodservice and school facility modernization efforts. This additional support will not only help school kitchens and cafeterias go green by reducing or eliminating the use of paper plates and other disposable materials, but also fund larger improvements that will transform our school meal programs from the ground up.

FNS and the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) collaborate closely to ensure child nutrition professionals across the country have access to evidence-based training, resources, and technical assistance to meet professional standards requirements and to strengthen program operators’ competencies, knowledge, and skills critical to running successful child nutrition programs. As a part of this cooperative agreement, the ICN provides trainings on a variety of topics, including menu planning, culinary skills, procurement of goods and services, inventory management and tracking, financial management, leadership, human resources, food safety, increasing program participation, and facilitating trainings for adult learners. These trainings are offered in a variety of formats, including in-person trainings, virtual instructor-led trainings, webinars and webinar recordings, and self-paced online training courses. Furthermore, USDA continues to work collaboratively with the ICN on the new Culinary Institute of Child Nutrition (CICN) that was established in March 2021. CICN provides school nutrition professionals with in-depth, hands-on culinary trainings, webinars, culinary videos, podcast interviews with school nutrition program chefs, an online information center, and other resources that are foundational for scratch-based cooking and the creation of culinary-inspired school meals that are healthy, flavorful, and student-approved. A new podcast series features interviews with school nutrition program chefs from around the country to take a peek inside their kitchen operations and see how they are inspiring child nutrition.

[Whereupon, at 1:24 p.m. the Subcommittee was adjourned.]