

**Statement of Kevin Concannon
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Before the House Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

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Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the upcoming reauthorization of the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Child Nutrition Programs and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). It is a pleasure to be here today to talk about USDA's priorities for reauthorization. Having worked as a State Health and Human Services Commissioner in Maine, Oregon, and Iowa, I know firsthand how important these programs are to the nation, especially in these challenging economic times.

In his first year in office, President Obama pulled us back from the brink of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. As we work to lay a new foundation for economic growth, we must ensure that the cornerstone is the nutritious meals available to children. Our ability to respond quickly to their need is a testament to the successful design of the Child Nutrition Programs. But we cannot rest there. The stark reality is that today we face a public health crisis of high child obesity rates across the country. The Child Nutrition Programs serve as a model of good nutrition, teaching children and their families to make wise food choices so they will lead healthy productive lives. More than 60 years since President Truman created the National School Lunch Program, our efforts have grown so that we now reach over 31 million school children each school day. These children are our future and we remain committed to President Truman's observation -- "in the long view, no Nation is healthier than its children."

BACKGROUND

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

The National School Lunch Program was enacted in 1946 as a necessary response to the widespread malnutrition-related health problems revealed among young draftees during World War II. Today, we face a similar threat to the future of our national security. A recent report by Mission: Readiness found 27 percent of our Nation's young people are too overweight to serve

in the armed forces. Since the beginning of the NSLP, leaders in Congress have also recognized that nutritious lunches would contribute to success in schools. Our understanding of the links between nutrition, health, and education have grown over time, and the program has responded with changes that make the program more accessible to low-income children, and improve the content of meals to reflect up-to-date nutrition science. Through these changes, the core nutrition and education mission behind school meals remains just as important, if not more important, today.

CHALLENGES

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

Obesity and the health conditions that it causes are related in part to poor diets, including the under-consumption of fruits and vegetables. Children and youth are also not as physically active as experts recommend to prevent obesity and promote good health and this, too, contributes to the “energy balance” problem that leads to obesity. This is one reason why USDA is joining with First Lady Michelle Obama in aggressively promoting the Healthier US School Challenge, which recognizes schools that do an exceptional job promoting the meal participation, meal quality, nutrition education and physical activity.

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

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

OPPORTUNITIES/BROAD IMPACT

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

We can improve access to meals and explore new means of empowering communities to reduce food insecurity and hunger, especially among our children. We can make every school a place where nutrition and learning shape the food offered by improving the quality of meals,

eliminating foods that do not support healthful choices, and expanding physical activity opportunities.

We can help pregnant women, new mothers, and the youngest children receive the support they need for an optimally healthy start, and support working families using child care, by providing nutritious food for their children, to help them deal with the challenges of today's economy. This is the power of these programs – and the opportunity we share to harness that power for a better future.

While the focus of reauthorization must remain on access and improving quality, we understand the underlying responsibility we have to make sure the food our children eat is both nutritious and safe. That is why we've begun a complete review of our programs and protocols to enhance the safety of all food that is served to our children, and why we recently announced a series of reforms designed to ensure that the foods we procure are safe and of the highest quality. Parents expect as much and children deserve no less.

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

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

PRIORITIES

The Administration has two main priorities for Child Nutrition Programs that I will discuss this morning: (1) reducing barriers and improving access to combat childhood hunger; and (2) enhancing nutritional quality and the health of the school environment. Improving program performance is also important to us, and we will be attentive to that goal throughout the reauthorization process. We are confident the following recommended changes will move us towards achieving our goals and bring us to an historic Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization.

- Provide a reimbursement rate increase for school meals. Reauthorization must substantially improve the nutritional value of the meals being served to our children and play a central role in the Let's Move campaign's effort to solve childhood obesity in a generation. Last October, IOM released recommendations to USDA to improve school

meals, which pave the way for the first major revision of the nutrition standards for school meals since 1995. We are working aggressively to implement new standards based on the IOM recommendations to better align our meals with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, but we also know that the improved foods will require increased costs for local schools. That is why we are calling on Congress to increase the reimbursement rate for the National School Lunch Program, to help schools purchase the whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and low fat and fat free dairy products that our children need to grow strong and healthy. Let me be clear -- our expectation is that school meals will improve as USDA issues new meal requirements that emphasize fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. Any increases in the reimbursement rate must be conditioned on the fact that the increases will pay for improved quality and improved nutrition, not just the status quo. This assistance will be critically important as we work with State partners, schools and school food service professionals to successfully implement the new standards and our enhanced expectations for the program to serve the most nutritious meals possible.

- Increase school breakfast reimbursement and provide commodity support. We recommend an increase in the reimbursement rate for school breakfasts and combine that support with USDA-purchased foods to give more children the option of a healthy breakfast. Increasing participation in school breakfast must be part of reauthorization. On school days, almost two-thirds of children who participate in the lunch program do not participate in the school breakfast program. A healthy breakfast is critically important to educational achievement. This reauthorization is an opportunity to promote innovative approaches which have been shown to reduce stigma and promote participation in the program, like serving breakfast in the classroom.
- Establish nutrition standards for all food served in schools. While improved school meals are critical to our nutrition and obesity prevention goals, the challenge of helping kids stay healthy extend beyond reimbursable school meals. Children are subject to innumerable influences in their environment. As they develop preferences and practices that will last a lifetime, their choices are shaped by their surroundings – at home, in school, and in their wider community. The school nutrition environment is a powerful influence in this regard. Accordingly, we recommend the establishing standards for all food served and sold in schools. A 2006 study showed that outside the cafeteria, children are three times more likely to be able to purchase cookies, cakes, pastries, and high fat salty snacks than fruits or vegetables. Foods served in vending machines and the à la carte line shouldn't undermine our efforts to enhance the health of the school environment. It doesn't mean banning vending machines in schools – just filling them with nutritious offerings to make a healthy choice the easy choice for our nation's children. From food service professionals to the National PTA to the food industry, there is support for this new authority, and it must be a component of the reauthorization bill.
- Test strategies in the cafeteria setting to encourage children's selection and consumption of healthy foods. School food service venues offer a prime opportunity for students to learn to make healthier food choices, and build lifelong healthier eating habits. We support providing competitive grants to States and local public and non-profit

organizations to promote increased consumption of whole grains, fruits and vegetables, low- and fat-free milk through innovative food service delivery systems based on behavioral economics.

- Empower governors to eliminate hunger. We support a challenge to the nation's governors to eliminate child hunger by 2015 as part of reauthorization. A program of State Childhood Hunger Challenge Grants will provide competitive grants to allow governors to implement creative and innovative approaches to eliminating hunger. It will help States act as laboratories for successful strategies – to let them be creative in experimenting with models that match program delivery with evaluation, so that we can learn what works and what doesn't.
- Streamline the free and reduced price application process. We support offering grants to States and non-profit organizations to develop Web-based or other systems to streamline the application process and expand efforts to enroll eligible students through direct certification. If a child already qualifies for other assistance programs there is no reason why their parent should have to fill out one more application to qualify for school breakfast or school lunch.
- Establish bonus payments for improved direct certification. Bonus payments should be offered to States and school districts that effectively use direct certification to enroll children who currently qualify but who are not participating. In school districts with very high rates of students eligible for free and reduced price meals, the cost of paperwork and the risk of lost of application forms far outweigh any benefits.
- Establish paperless application systems in needy areas. We need the tools necessary to establish paperless application programs in the poorest school districts. The object of all these changes should be to ensure that every child gets the food they need to reach their highest potential.
- Provide funding to improve kitchen equipment and provide credentialing program for school food service directors. The 2009 IOM report also showed that training, school equipment, and technical assistance would be necessary to implement these changes to the food we serve. Recognizing that many schools do not have the equipment in place to provide food selections, the reauthorization should build upon the investments in equipment made by the 2010 Appropriations Act and 2009 Recovery Act and include funding (such as grant programs) to improve school kitchens so schools can provide meals that meet the Dietary Guidelines and increase consumption of more fresh fruits and vegetables. At the same time, we should create a credentialing program for school food service directors, and support school food service providers with resources for the critical training they need to do their jobs, effectively and accurately.
- Strengthen wellness policies. We also believe that every lunchroom ought to double as a classroom, and that schools should be challenged to make meals a learning experience. That is why it is important for us to build on the step taken in the 2004 reauthorization bill to establish school wellness policies in every school by strengthening the requirement

and raising the standard, which includes increasing physical activity among students

- Provide parents and students nutrition information about foods served in schools. Making sure that parents and students have correct and complete nutritional information about foods being served in schools must be part of the reauthorization effort as well. With better information and simple assessments, parents will know what is available in their child's cafeteria and can better assist their children in making the right nutritional choices.
- Strengthen farm-to-school efforts. Strengthening the link between local farmers and school cafeterias must remain a priority for this legislation. Supporting farm-to-school programs will increase the amount of produce available to cafeterias and help to support local farmers by establishing regular, institutional buyers. Many schools are using farm-to-school programs as an important component of nutrition education. USDA has begun to deploy a farm-to-school team to help school districts understand how they can purchase and serve local foods. Education leaders and our State and local partners need to embrace farm-to-cafeteria programs and school garden programs to help strengthen the link between consumers and farmers.
- Expand at-risk afterschool child care food program. One idea that warrants attention is to expand the existing authority of the Child and Adult Care Food Program to provide afterschool meals to at-risk kids to all 50 States. This successful program currently provides extra nutrition assistance to eligible children in 14 States – and there is no reason it shouldn't be expanded to include an additional 140,000 children.
- Advance program integrity. Guaranteeing the integrity of the nutrition programs remains central to a credible reauthorization. We should fund periodic studies to eliminate erroneous payments in the meal programs. Support for new technology and increasing the use of direct certification will help schools avoid inaccuracies in eligibility determinations, and maintain the confidence that our help is only provided to those who need it.
- Nutrition standards in childcare settings. We also recognize that children develop nutrition habits early, often in their preschool years. CACFP provides children with an opportunity to develop healthy habits that will last a lifetime. We look forward to consideration of the forthcoming IOM study that will make recommendations to revise CACFP meal patterns to serve meals and snacks consistent with the Dietary Guidelines and other relevant science.

Our priorities and many more will be debated by Congress in the near future as you consider legislation to modernize these programs. Just as teachers inspire and parents encourage our children we must ensure that healthy food is available to help these future generations grow and learn. This Administration is committed to combating hunger and providing healthier foods to our nation's children, and I hope we'll have your support in these efforts.

Again, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you this

morning to discuss the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Programs and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.