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Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight,
Nutrition and Forestry

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Good morning, and thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Fortenberry, and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to discuss access to healthful foods in the nutrition assistance programs.

As you know, USDA oversees 15 nutrition assistance programs, from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), in which benefits are provided through electronic benefit cards used by participants to purchase foods at authorized retail stores, to programs like the Commodity Supplemental Food Program and Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, in which food is provided directly to the participants.

Improving access to food, specifically healthy and nutritious food, is central to the Department of Agriculture's food and nutrition efforts. In each of our nutrition assistance programs, it is important that we not only enroll as many eligible people as possible, but also provide information to make sure that our clients know how to make healthful, nutritious food choices and, in programs like SNAP, ensure that retailers are available for recipients to redeem benefits.

Our most recent data shows that most American households--nearly 89 percent--are food secure. But that leaves 11.1 percent, or 13 million households, who were food insecure at some time during 2008. Of those, 4.7 million experienced very low food security at some time during the year. And when I say food insecure, make no mistake that I mean they are hungry.

At the same time, we face an obesity epidemic among not only adults but our children as well. As unbelievable as it may seem, obesity and hunger do coexist. Sixty-eight percent of adult Americans are considered obese or overweight, while 16.9 percent of children are obese and 31.7 percent are overweight. Nearly 10 percent of American health spending can be attributed to obesity. Clearly, these are critical public health issues, with significant consequences for our nation's future.

These data leave no doubt that the need for improved access to healthy foods is evident every day across the country. At the same time, they underscore the need for sound nutrition guidance to nutrition assistance program participants and the general public. People must have the knowledge and the desire to make a behavior change toward healthier lifestyles.

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.

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.

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs provide nutritious meals to 31 million school children in over 101,000 schools throughout the nation. Improving the food choices that children have, and that they actually make, at school are central to our efforts to improve their diets and address the obesity crisis. Work is already underway to improve the nutrition standards for the school meals programs, based on recommendations we received from an Institute of Medicine expert panel late last year that proposed more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products in school menus. To complement this effort, we are working with the Agricultural Marketing Service to examine ways to improve Farm to School efforts across the county. Our team is learning from successful school districts to see how they have matched local production with the needs of the school meal programs. If we can increase farm income and at the same time educate school children that food indeed comes from the farm and the farmer, we will have accomplished two important objectives simultaneously.

To help people make wise dietary choices, USDA's MyPyramid.gov provides dietary guidance and educational materials that help Americans improve their diet and become more physically active. MyPyramid helps Americans personalize their approach to choosing a healthier lifestyle that balances nutrition and exercise. It encourages them to improve their overall health significantly by making modest improvements to their diet and by incorporating regular physical activity into their daily lives. MyPyramid, which translates the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans into accessible and useful information for the general public, continues to be a significant means of helping Americans take "Steps to a Healthier You."

Nutrition education is also provided in many of the nutrition assistance programs. For example, the goal of SNAP nutrition education, or SNAP-Ed, is to improve the likelihood that persons eligible for SNAP benefits will make healthy food choices within a limited budget and choose physically active lifestyles consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and My Pyramid. In partnership with the 52 SNAP State agencies that provide SNAP-Ed, nearly 100 organizations such as Cooperative Extension Service outlets, nutrition networks, health departments, and food banks, provide nutrition education through hundreds of projects. A study is currently underway to identify models of effective SNAP-Ed nutrition education and their impacts on nutrition related behaviors. In addition, FNS provides free nutrition education resources including a recipe finder with over 600 easy, tasty, and low cost recipes, materials designed for Spanish speaking mothers, and materials designed for older adults.

Participants in programs like SNAP need not only need the EBT cards to purchase healthy food and the knowledge to make healthy choices but they also need access to stores where healthy foods are plentiful. As of September 30, 2009, there were 193,754 firms authorized to participate in SNAP.

Currently, to be eligible to participate in SNAP, stores must sell food for home preparation and consumption and meet one of the following criteria:

(A) Offer for sale, on a continuous basis (any given day of operation), at least three varieties of qualifying foods in each of the following four staple food groups, with perishable foods in at least two of the categories: meat, poultry or fish; bread or cereal; vegetables or fruits; or dairy products.

(B) More than 50 percent of the total dollar amount of all things (food, nonfood, gas and services) sold in the store must be from the sale of eligible staple foods.

Over the past six years, the number of authorized firms has increased 27 percent. Over 85 percent of all benefits are redeemed at 20 percent of authorized stores, such as supermarkets and superstores that offer a substantial variety of staple foods including fruits and vegetables. In the near future, we expect to release a new tool that will help clients find the SNAP authorized stores near their home or workplace, providing them with additional information to help access healthy food options.

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, also known as the 2008 Farm Bill, authorized \$20 million for projects to evaluate health and nutrition promotion in SNAP to determine if incentives provided to SNAP recipients at the point-of-sale increase the consumption of fruits, vegetables, or other healthful foods. At USDA, we call this the Healthy Incentive Pilot project (HIP). The legislation requires that "[the] independent evaluation...use rigorous methodologies, particularly random assignment..." USDA will implement a randomized control evaluation approach which will allow for comparison between the groups that receive the incentive and those that don't in order to determine the impacts of HIP. This research design provides the rigor necessary to attribute any changes in fruit and vegetable consumption to the incentive. The evaluation

will also assess HIP's impacts on the State SNAP Agency and its partners and describe the procedures involved in planning, implementing and operating the pilot. The competitive solicitations for both the project evaluator and the pilot sites were recently released.

Increasing the number of farmers' market authorized to accept SNAP benefits is another way to improve access to healthful foods. It is a top priority at USDA. Farmers' market participation in SNAP is a win-win situation for local farmers who expand their customer base and for participants who gain access to healthy produce. In fiscal year 2009, over 900 farmers and farmers' markets were authorized to accept SNAP benefits, an increase of 25 percent over the prior year. FNS has a goal to authorize an additional 200 farmers' markets each year. To aid in this effort, the President's Budget for 2011 includes a proposal for \$4 million to provide farmers markets with SNAP EBT equipment.

Our sister agency, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), offers the Farmers' Market Promotion Program which provides grants that encourage and support expansion of farmers markets. The authorizing statute requires at least 10 percent of grant funds to be directed towards projects to support the use of EBT for federal nutrition programs at farmers markets. This program has helped many markets overcome barriers to purchasing equipment and become SNAP authorized.

To further support FNS's priority of increasing the number of SNAP authorized farmers' markets, we've recently made a number of improvements to streamline the process for farmers' markets seeking SNAP authorization. This new guidance reduces administrative burdens on the State agencies while streamlining the authorization process for farmers' markets. This information is posted on our web page. Farmers' markets are often the center of the community and are an excellent venue for outreach and nutrition education. Farmers' markets offer a place to educate potential clients about the benefits of participation in SNAP. USDA encourages State SNAP officials to incorporate farmers' markets in outreach and nutrition education efforts.

Farmers' market incentive programs also encourage healthy eating. Such projects provide matching "bonus dollars" for purchases made with SNAP benefits. The incentives, funded by private foundations, non-profit organizations and local governments, improve the purchasing power of low-income SNAP participants at farmers' markets so they can buy more fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods.

Farmers' markets play a key role in access to healthy foods in the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and in the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. During fiscal year 2008, 2.3 million WIC recipients and 964,000 seniors received coupons redeemable at farmers' markets. A variety of fresh, nutritious, unprepared, locally grown fruits, vegetables and herbs may be purchased with FMNP coupons. In addition, seniors can purchase honey.

While the growth in authorized retailers and farmers' markets is a good sign that most SNAP recipients have access to food retailers, there remain issues to be addressed. First and foremost, we need to ask to what extent those stores offer the healthy food choices that SNAP participants need and want. Second, we need better information to determine whether areas with limited access have inadequate access. Better measures of access, information on food prices, and data on the relative availability of all food types, not just healthy food items are needed to authoritatively describe food deserts. And, finally, how can we encourage changes to make healthy food more readily available in such areas? USDA stands ready to explore all of these areas through research, analysis, and eventually, policy, if needed.

As I mentioned before, the Healthy Incentive Pilot is one effort that will contribute greatly to our knowledge in this area. If the incentive does entice more demand for healthful foods, it should increase the desire of retailers to stock such items. It is too soon to speculate what effect this might have on food deserts, but it is worth noting that such an incentive may well play a positive role.

The President's fiscal year 2011 budget makes available over \$400 million in financial and technical assistance to bring grocery stores and other healthy food retailers to food deserts. This effort is known as the Healthy Food Financing Initiative and is a partnership between the Departments of Treasury, Health and Human Services and Agriculture designed to eliminate food deserts within the next seven years. The objectives of this effort are to increase access to healthy and affordable food choices in underserved urban and rural communities, help reduce the high incidence of diet related diseases, create jobs and economic development, and establish market opportunities for farmers and ranchers. The Healthy Food Financing

Initiative will expand access to nutritious foods by developing and equipping grocery stores and other healthy food retailers in communities that currently lack these options.

At the same time, we look forward to the contributions of our partners in private industry and the advocacy community and to learning more about their creative approaches to addressing this problem. Improving access in the areas where choice is limited is a challenge, but it is one we must undertake if we are to solve our dual problems of food insecurity and obesity.

In the Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Service mission area at USDA, our role is also to make sure that all low income people who are eligible are enrolled in the nutrition assistance programs to provide them with the supplement to their food budget that enables the purchase of healthy foods. As such, access to the Federal nutrition assistance programs remains a top priority

Despite record participation in SNAP, totaling more than 39 million participants in January 2010, there remain underserved populations – while the participation rate among all eligible was 66 percent in 2007, less than one third of eligible elderly participate and only 56 percent of eligible Hispanics participate. And this is why outreach remains a critical component of our access efforts. The most common reason that eligible people don't participate is because they don't know they are eligible. Therefore, in order to maximize participation in SNAP, USDA conducts direct marketing activities, and provides funding, and outreach materials as well as technical assistance to public organizations, including State SNAP agencies, as well as neighborhood and faith based organizations that conduct SNAP outreach and marketing efforts.

FNS has a multitude of free outreach materials, some designed specifically for seniors, and most available in English and Spanish to help people recognize their potential eligibility and raise awareness about the nutrition benefits of SNAP. Materials include brochures, flyers, posters, and radio and television public service announcements. An online pre-screening tool in English and Spanish lets the user know if they might be eligible for benefits and how much they might receive. FNS also operates a toll free number in English and Spanish that provides callers with information about the program. Each year, FNS uses radio advertising in English and Spanish, to reach low income people in underserved areas. Finally, FNS has awarded outreach grants to neighborhood and faith-based organizations to support development and implementation of promising outreach strategies to reach low income seniors and Latinos.

At the same time, we need to make sure that we simplify the application process, remove barriers to participation and provide the highest quality customer service. In SNAP, States have a variety of policy options available to improve access. Currently, 31 States use broad-based categorical eligibility to raise the gross income limits and raise or eliminate asset tests in SNAP. Such efforts make the program available to families with low incomes and modest assets as well as those with high expenses but gross incomes slightly higher than the normal gross income test. I strongly encourage all States to implement this policy. States are also using telephone interviews in place of face to face interview and tailoring the length of interviews to specific questions to reduce the burdens on clients and state staff.

Through direct certification, children who are eligible for free meals because their households are approved for SNAP benefits are identified. Annually, USDA reports to Congress on direct certification and have gained insight into what works best by talking to staff who manage direct certification in their state. From the most recent report which was issued in October, 2009 we focused on those states who had the greatest improvement in the percentages of children who were directly certified and asked how they did it. We will be promoting these best practices and others through the direct certification grants (\$22 million) provided through the FY 2010 Agriculture Appropriations Act.

USDA also works hard to improve what we offer directly to program participants in the commodity programs. We have reduced the fat, sodium and sugar in the USDA foods being offered and will continue to make improvements on an ongoing basis.

The WIC food packages were recently revised to reflect recommendations by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and more closely align with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and infant feeding guidelines of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The changes, which promote healthier options for WIC participants by adding fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and emphasizing low-fat milk, may also benefit the larger community by increasing the availability of nutritious food options in small grocery stores and corner stores.

In closing, the Obama Administration is committed to improving the Federal nutrition assistance programs and to assuring that those in need have access to program benefits, the knowledge to make wise food choices with those benefits, and that retailers are accessible so that participants have access to healthy foods in their communities. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have and, again, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this issue today.