



Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

Opening Statement of Chair Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)
Subcommittee on Civil Rights & Human Services Hearing
Examining the USDA's Proposed Cuts to Free School Meals
2175 Rayburn House Office Building
Wednesday, October 16, 2019 | 2:00 p.m.

Today we will examine a Department of Agriculture proposal that will eliminate automatic access to free school meals for close to one million children and threaten their food security.

On July 23rd, USDA proposed a new rule that will restrict eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. On its own, the proposal will cut access to food assistance for 3.1 million low-income Americans, which will have significant consequences for individuals and families struggling to get by. In my home state of Oregon, 16 percent of households will lose access to SNAP benefits as a result of this proposed rule.

But, as we will discuss today, the proposal will have additional consequences for low-income children, many of whom count on school meals as their most consistent source of nutrition.

Through a provision called categorical eligibility, children who are eligible for SNAP are automatically eligible for free school meals. According to the Department's own analysis released late yesterday afternoon, its proposed changes to SNAP will cut automatic access to free school meals for **close to one million children**.

Shockingly, the Department failed to disclose this analysis when it published its proposal, despite being required to do so. In fact, the only reason we originally knew the consequences of the proposed SNAP rule is that a member of the Committee staff asked the Department directly on a briefing call about the effect on school meals.

After waiting months for this analysis, we now have learned that the rule will be even worse for students and families than we originally understood, and the Department still has not fully accounted for the ripple effects of its proposal.

Under the Community Eligibility Provision, nearly 2,000 schools across the country provide free school meals to all their students because more than 40 percent of their students participate in an anti-poverty program, such as SNAP. Schools participating in Community Eligibility appreciate the simplification of the program, the reduction of paperwork, and, importantly, the elimination of stigma among students.

For schools currently just above the 40 percent threshold, the proposed rule very well could kick enough students off SNAP that the school would lose access to the Community Eligibility Provision. As a result, these schools will be forced to go through the burdensome process of asking low-income families to fill out individual applications for free or reduced price school meals. We already know that, without community eligibility, hungry children who would otherwise be eligible across the country are going without meals. And we now know that the Department failed to account for the potential effect in its analysis.

Inevitably, if this rule is implemented, many more low-income students who are eligible for free or reduced price school meals will not receive the food assistance they desperately need. That is nothing short of a preventable tragedy.

To justify its proposed rule, the Administration is pointing to a single case of one wealthy individual who intentionally manipulated the SNAP system, and arguing that we must, quote, “close loopholes.”

To be clear, we are not talking about wealthy kids taking advantage of the system. According to USDA’s own analysis, 93 percent of households that will lose eligibility for free school meals will still be eligible for reduced price school meals after filling out an individual application. These are children from poor families living just above the poverty line. It’s not easy for these families. Just last week I met with Family Promise, an organization that helps homeless families get back on their feet and regain independence. A tearful mother shared her story of trying to find employment that will cover rent; it’s already hard and this rule will only exacerbate the challenges for those who are struggling.

The Department is using a misleading claim to dismiss the real struggles of millions of families in dire need of food assistance. The reality is that the Administration is going to be making more hungry children go without breakfast or lunch to pay for its nearly \$2 trillion tax cut that overwhelmingly benefited corporations and the wealthy.

The Trump Administration’s proposed rule not only denies children automatic access to school meals, it denies them the ability to reach their potential. A large body of scientific research and basic commonsense shows that hungry children can’t learn. The President himself recognized the importance of school lunch to our nation’s children when he declared this week National School Lunch Week. I note that it is hypocritical; at the same time the President acknowledges the critical role these meals play in the academic success of students, his Administration is moving forward with a proposed rule that will limit access to these meals for almost a million children. At a time when one in seven children are already food insecure, we should be doing so much more to prevent child hunger.

Mr. Lipps, thank you again for being here for this important conversation; however, I also need to express my disappointment on two points. First, Committee staff pointed out to the Department that your written testimony directly addressed a different Committee than the one you are before today, and further it does not address the effect of the proposed SNAP rule on school meals. Despite bringing that to your attention, you declined the opportunity to make changes to your written testimony and make it more responsive to the topic of today’s hearing.

Second, your Department waited until yesterday afternoon to release an analysis that the Committee has been requesting for months, and, unfortunately, you only intend to reopen the comment period for two weeks. This is woefully insufficient in light of how many people will be affected by this rule. I hope you will show respect to Members of this Committee and the people we represent by addressing these concerns directly in your oral testimony and answers during today’s hearing.

Now, I will yield to the Ranking Member for the purpose of making an opening statement.