

**Statement of Stacy Dean**  
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**United States Department of Agriculture**  
**Before the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services**  
**Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives**  
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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

while it rebounded in some areas during the pandemic, it remained lower than the previous year even as child hunger soared.

At the same time, we see mortality rates for infants born to Black and Indigenous women that are at least twice as high as for infants born to white women – a tragic manifestation of systemic inequities. Disparities have also created conditions that result in inadequate health care and higher rates of overweight and obesity, asthma and severe asthma, childhood mortality and overall poor health. The Administration is committed to addressing these disparities. Thanks to the work of our community partners, we have a strong foundation to work from. WIC participation rates among eligible Black and Latinx families are actually higher than average, and racial disparities in breastfeeding initiation have been steadily improving.

We face the dual challenge of boosting participation and leveraging WIC as a critical intervention for all children both to meet the immediate crisis and to support better maternal and child health outcomes for all families. The American Rescue Plan Act includes a historic investment in WIC and the Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which we will deploy to improve program delivery and increase participation. This effort will include a robust national outreach campaign to ensure that eligible families know about the program's benefits and offer new, easy ways for them to enroll. It will also encourage innovation to improve service delivery and increase participation and utilization of benefits. As these innovations and initiatives proceed, we stand ready to work with the Subcommittee on statutory changes that support and complement these efforts and ensure that the critical nutrition benefits of WIC reach those who need them.

Strengthening the Child Nutrition and WIC programs is a meaningful way to advance the President's priorities as they provide relief to struggling families, build and enhance racial equity, and create a better future. I look forward to our dialogue to understand how we can work together to advance them. Thank you for the opportunity to join you today.