

**Presentation for the USDA Outreach Session on Child
Nutrition Program Reauthorization**

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Good morning. My name is Jim Weill and I am the President of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). FRAC is a national organization that works for more effective public and private policies to eradicate domestic hunger and undernutrition. We work closely with state and local organizations across the country to maximize access to and use of child nutrition programs as one important means to end childhood hunger and improve child well-being.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to share FRAC's suggestions on important changes that should be made in the child nutrition programs during the 2003 reauthorization. Our suggestions are based on a combination of what we have seen and heard working with our many local and state partners around the country, and what we know about the child nutrition programs, how they operate and the impact of legislative changes, based on FRAC's 30 years of experience with the child nutrition programs.

The 2003 reauthorization presents a range of opportunities to achieve pressing national goals. The child nutrition programs are one of the largest (more than \$12 billion per year), as well as one of the most effective federal investments in low-income children. As we proceed in reauthorization, we should recognize at the outset the enormous positive impact the child nutrition programs have had, are having and can have in the future on the physical, emotional, developmental, educational and economic well-being of low-income children, their families and their communities. A well-conceived reauthorization bill can build from these strengths and repair recognized weaknesses. A well-conceived reauthorization bill can help the nation reach many important goals: not just reducing childhood hunger, but improving prenatal care and child nutrition and health, enhancing early child development, raising the quality of child care, increasing jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, improving the achievement of school-aged children, and supporting welfare-to-work efforts.

These programs are vital, and we should think ambitiously about how to improve them. This reauthorization is also a chance to build on the programs' strengths in order to tackle new health, demographic and workforce realities. As one example, many more low-income parents are working longer hours or nontraditional shifts. The need for before-school care, afterschool care that runs into the evening, and summer activities has become far greater, and therefore the need to adjust the nutrition programs to feed children in these hours has become urgent as well. Similarly, the growing incidence of childhood obesity clearly requires all of us in the reauthorization process to address how the programs can be strengthened in order to reduce obesity.

There are six key areas of improvement that we think could make an enormous difference in the child nutrition programs' reach and effectiveness.

- **First, every child needs to get off to a good start every day in school. Making school breakfast programs more broadly available to schoolchildren will help our nation to achieve this goal.** Some families can't afford to feed their children a good breakfast. Some have commuting or work hours that make it hard to provide breakfast to their children, or make the family breakfast so early or rushed that the child is hungry again when school starts. Some children can't eat a good breakfast right after waking up.

Some children have long commutes of their own to school. Regardless of the reason a child needs school breakfast, the experience of the last several years has shown that offering breakfast free of charge to all children in a school improves student achievement, behavior and attendance, and pulls more hungry, low-income children into the program by reducing the stigma of school breakfast being for “poor kids.” When breakfast is made available to all children in a school, the children, parents, teachers and administrators all see benefits. The 2003 child nutrition reauthorization should include provisions and funding to make free school breakfasts offered to all children possible in many more schools across the nation.

- **More school-aged children in outside school hours care should have access to nutritious meals and snacks year-round so that they can learn and play in safe and supportive environments while their parents work.** Making good nutrition available in outside school hours settings requires recruiting and keeping nutrition program sponsors, and making the programs accessible to children who are most in need. There are a number of changes that can be made in the Summer Food Service Program and in the programs (the National School Lunch Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program) offering afterschool snacks and suppers that will achieve these goals:
 - To encourage more sponsors to take on these programs in their communities, and to provide continuity for children and their families, those school-based and community-based sites in the Summer Food Service Program should be automatically eligible to offer afterschool snacks and suppers during the school year. We would propose also that programs which receive federal funds predominantly for low-income children, like 21st Century Community Learning Center funds, to operate afterschool or summer programs should be automatically eligible to participate in the afterschool snack and supper program and the Summer Food Service Program, and other steps should be taken to encourage them to participate as a condition of receiving the underlying federal assistance.
 - To increase access for children living in rural areas, and to make it easier for sponsors to operate the program in multiple sites, with the efficiencies that brings, the area eligibility threshold for afterschool snacks and suppers and the Summer Food Service Program should be lowered from 50 percent to 40 percent, and grants should be provided to underserved areas for transportation and program start-up and expansion.
 - Current statutory and regulatory pilots and waiver authorities that make it possible for more sponsors to offer snacks and meals in outside school hours care, (including the so-called “Lugar pilot” for 14 states on summer food, the “Seamless Waiver” for the Summer Food Service Program, and the afterschool suppers provision) should be considered for extension to all states and sponsors.
 - The adequacy of the reimbursements for meals and snacks in outside school hours programs must be carefully evaluated. Many sponsors and sites can not do the job

required at current reimbursement rates.

- **It is essential that the nutritional needs of those very vulnerable children who live in homeless and domestic violence shelters be met every day.** One change that could help ensure this is to allow such shelters to serve meals through the Child and Adult Care Food program to children up to 18 years of age, rather than just for children up to age 12, as is currently the case.
- **We have to improve the nutrition environment in which children consume the meals and snacks offered in the child nutrition programs.** The Secretary of Agriculture should have the authority to control the sale of competitive foods throughout the school from the time school opens in the morning until the end of the last lunch period, in order to ensure as much as reasonably possible the healthfulness of foods offered to children. Other steps to reduce health and obesity should be part of this process. While the quality of school meals has improved over the last several years, further administrative and legislative steps need to be considered. The time of day of meals and the amount of time children are given to eat also need to be part of this equation.
- **It is vital that we meet the developmental needs of very young children. Two of the keys to the best possible outcomes for preschool children are good nutrition and quality child care.** The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), in family child care homes, Head Start programs and child care centers, promotes both good nutrition and quality child care, which in turn allows children to develop fully, prepares children to enter school ready to learn, and helps parents work. There are some key steps we can take to ensure that children in family child care and centers get the healthy start they need.
 - CACFP sponsors and homes have struggled to stabilize the program since the 1996 reimbursement cuts. We can significantly improve CACFP's ability to reach low-income families using family child care by reducing the area eligibility test applied to the child care home from 50 percent to 40 percent. We also can reach more low-income children and reduce paperwork by extending CACFP categorical eligibility to beneficiaries of other means-tested federally funded programs that support low-income working families, including Medicaid/SCHIP and child care subsidy programs.
 - The new means test for CACFP in family child care homes, and the resulting reduced reimbursement rates, have had the unintended consequence of driving some providers out of the program altogether. The "Tier 2" reimbursement rates should be raised in order to make it worthwhile for more providers serving homes with a mix of low-income and middle-income families to participate in CACFP.
 - We also need to assure that sponsors of family child care homes have the resources needed to focus on important nutrition education and support services – some of which have been pushed aside in the last few years by the need to deal with an avalanche of new means test paperwork. Creating a modest sized grant program

for using CACFP to improve children's nutrition and child care quality, and increasing sponsors' administrative reimbursement rates to reflect the increased burden of the means test, could help sponsors focus on these important services. In addition, sponsors serving family child care homes in rural areas and other areas of highest need have to spend additional time, hire more staff and increase resources for travel. Reimbursement rates for these sponsors should be enhanced to meet these increased needs.

- We should make permanent the provision that allows for-profit child care centers to get CACFP funds for low-income children once they pass the threshold of serving 25 percent or more low-income children. We should extend categorical eligibility to state-supported Head Start and Even Start programs. And CACFP should offer a third meal for children in child care centers over eight hours.
- **Pregnancy and early childhood are critical periods for good nutrition, and numerous evaluations of the WIC program have demonstrated its positive impact on children's health and development.** We strongly believe that a funding mechanism must be found and implemented to ensure that all women, infants and young children who qualify to participate in WIC are able to do so.

Our final point relates to proposals for "streamlining" the child nutrition programs. The overriding goal of streamlining should be to make it easier and more attractive for children and program sponsors to participate in the child nutrition programs with less unnecessary paperwork, while maintaining and improving the availability of the current programs and their benefits in every community and maintaining and improving program integrity.

We look forward to working with the Department to take steps like these and to improve the nutrition and health of our nation's children.