



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 Protections Hearing

Examining the Policies and Priorities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Wednesday, June 4, 2019 | 10:15am

Mr. Lipps, thank you for appearing before the Committee today on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, or FNS.

Before I begin, I would like to recognize and thank the Department for working with staff during the government shutdown earlier this year. Members were justifiably concerned with the effect of the shutdown on families across the country and we appreciate your efforts to minimize the disruption.

According to its mission statement, the main objective of FNS is to end hunger and obesity and strengthen access to healthy food through nutrition assistance programs.

Today's hearing is an opportunity to assess the commitment of FNS to that mission.

Congress has long-recognized the federal government's important role in addressing food insecurity, which affects roughly 15 million U.S. households – including a staggering 1 in 5 children in my home state of Oregon.

Over the course of more than 70 years, federal child nutrition programs have proven to be an effective approach to providing children with the healthy food they need to succeed. Research shows that expanding access to nutritious food through child nutrition programs not only improves children's educational growth and outcomes, but also improves their health through adulthood.

Because of these benefits, Congress has historically supported and strengthened child nutrition programs on a bipartisan basis. In fact, today, child nutrition programs operated by FNS serve more than 30 million children throughout the year in nearly every corner of the country. In Oregon, nearly 300,000 students participated in the National School Lunch Program, and nearly 150,000 students participated in the School Breakfast Program last school year.

We should all be uniting in support of these valuable evidence-based programs. Yet, under this Administration, FNS has repeatedly rolled back nutrition standards, which are an important part of addressing childhood obesity and diabetes, and undermined programs that help struggling families put food on the table.

The Administration's annual budget proposal for the USDA outlines a set of priorities that reflects this disturbing diversion from the mission of FNS.

For example, the proposed budget sought to make it harder for schools in low-income areas to provide free meals to all students by excluding 3,000 schools from the widely popular Community Eligibility Provision. **As a result, up to 1.3 million children could be left without free school meals, and those schools will have to spend more time with administrative paperwork.**

Additionally, through rulemaking and other actions, the Administration is actively taking steps to undermine food security. For example, USDA recently moved to prevent children who rely on non-custodial adults – including children whose families are struggling with the opioid epidemic – from accessing free school meals through their families’ participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

Worse still, the Administration is exploring ways to redefine poverty itself by upending how the federal poverty line is adjusted for inflation. If successful, thousands of children whose families struggle to make ends meet would be cut-off from vital nutrition assistance. All of these actions taken together reveal a Department of Agriculture that is not adhering to its commitment to provide basic nutrition assistance for the children and families who need it most.

Each Member here knows that providing children with healthy and nutritious food is vital to fostering the success of our nation’s future. When children are hungry, they can’t learn. Restricting access to nutrition assistance programs will prevent children from reaching their full potential, and ultimately will cost more in the long run. We can and must do better.

Mr. Lipps, thank you again for being here. I look forward to this opportunity to discuss the important issues under the purview of the Food and Nutrition Service and I do hope that we can all work together on behalf of our nation’s children and families.

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