



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chair Suzanne Bonamici (OR-01)

Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services Hearing

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

Wednesday, May 12, 2021 | 12:00 p.m. ET

We are holding this hearing, today, to learn about and discuss the Biden Administration's priorities for federal child nutrition programs and the steps we should take to prevent children and families from going hungry during this pandemic and beyond. I want to thank Deputy Under Secretary Dean for being with us today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented number of children across the country to go hungry. Widespread school closures combined with the economic crisis created a nightmare scenario in which hunger among children and families surged to unprecedented levels.

Even before the pandemic, too many children did not have access to healthy food. In 2018, nearly 1 in every 7 households with children struggled to put enough food on the table.

Unfortunately, just weeks into the pandemic, more than 1 in every 3 households with children and nearly half of all mothers with young children struggled with food insecurity.

By mid-July, as many as 17 million children were not getting enough to eat because their families could not afford it. I will say that again: less than a year ago, nearly **17 million** children were not getting enough to eat.

This crisis has been far worse for the families—many of them families of color—who were already food insecure when the pandemic started. During the early stages of the pandemic, both Black and Latinx families experienced food insecurity at twice the rate of White families.

These numbers should alarm all of us. Children who go hungry are far more vulnerable to chronic health challenges. And, without access to healthy food, children struggle to build the foundation they need to learn, grow, and lead a fulfilling life.

Last year, Congress acted swiftly to expand access to nutrition assistance as schools across the country closed. One of the first relief packages—the *Families First Coronavirus Response Act*—gave the USDA critical flexibility to allow schools and community partners to deliver meals to families and offer free meals to **all** children through the Summer Food Service Program.

Families First also included bipartisan legislation I led to eliminate other barriers to providing nutrition assistance.

The bill also created the Pandemic EBT program, or P-EBT, so that low-income families, who could not physically get to school meal sites, could still receive funding to help feed their children.

I have visited with the dedicated staff at Aloha-Huber Park Elementary School and Hayhurst Elementary School in northwest Oregon. I spoke with the administrators. I spoke with the staff and the families about how these program help meet the needs of students and families.

These investments have made a significant difference for families in Oregon and across the country. Research indicates that P-EBT has lifted as many as 3.9 million children out of hunger. And recent reporting indicates that the share of Americans struggling with hunger is now at its lowest level since the pandemic started.

Despite our progress, we know too many children are still going to bed hungry. But the clear lesson from our successful efforts to bolster nutrition assistance programs is that, when we provide people in need with relief, they use those resources to feed their families.

Fortunately, the American Jobs Plan includes important investments in school kitchens and the American Families Plan would invest \$43 billion in our federal child nutrition programs.

We should swiftly advance these bills.

The American Families Plan also makes permanent and nationwide the Summer EBT program, which already provides food assistance to some families during the summer months. This program will feed children across the country at a time when they are not getting healthy school meals.

The package also expands the popular Community Eligibility Provision, or CEP. This expansion would feed roughly 9.3 million more children by making them eligible for free school meals.

Moving forward, the Committee must also update the underlying laws that authorize our federal child nutrition programs. They have been expired since 2015. The last child nutrition reauthorization, which Congress passed in 2010 with bipartisan support, dramatically expanded access to child nutrition programs. We should work together again to renew these critical laws.

This hearing is an opportunity to examine these steps with Deputy Under Secretary Dean and consider the future of child nutrition as we recover from the pandemic. How will our 5 or 10-year outlook change if we confront the child hunger crisis now?

I look forward to discussing these questions and the work we have ahead to make sure that all children in this country can access the healthy food they need to thrive.