

Statement of Cindy Long
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United States Department of Agriculture
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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 Cindy Long, the Administrator of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) 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 start by thanking you for your commitment to these programs and to America's children.

I know the Members of the Subcommittee are well-versed in the impact and importance of the Child Nutrition Programs and of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children—or WIC. These programs are highly effective at connecting parents and caregivers, babies, and children with nutritious food and promoting good nutrition so that parents and caregivers can take steps to support their children's health, growth, and development.

In my testimony, I want to highlight the power and reach of these programs, how they have adapted to meet the moment during the pandemic, and to talk about short and long-term challenges and opportunities.

[Child Nutrition and WIC: A Record of Success](#)

Prior to the pandemic, about 30 million students relied on school meals to get the nutrition they need to grow and learn, including nearly 22 million from low-income families that received these meals free or at reduced price. For many children, school breakfast and lunch make up about half of what they eat every day, and we know that access to nutritious meals makes a difference for our kids' success in the classroom. So, when we move the needle on nutrition in school meals, we can expect to see meaningful impacts for millions of children.

The National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, Summer Food Service Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program provide critical nutrition to tens of millions of children every day, while exposing them to healthy foods and nurturing healthy habits they can carry throughout their lives.

The WIC program is one of the nation's most important and cost-effective public health programs. There is strong evidence that participation in WIC leads to better pregnancy outcomes—fewer infant deaths, fewer premature births, and increased birth weights—and saves money on health care costs. It also leads to better health and academic outcomes for children.

Responding to the Pandemic: A Collective Effort

The pandemic has shined a light on just how essential and impactful these programs are. The past few years have presented challenges to the WIC and school meal programs that no one could have imagined. I applaud Congress for recognizing the extraordinary need and acting quickly to address it—not just once, but in five separate pieces of legislation over the past two years, and another in just the past month. Together, we have taken bold action to help ensure our children and families can safely access healthy food they depend on through Child Nutrition Programs and WIC.

USDA has capitalized fully on the authorities Congress provided and has taken aggressive action to support states and local program operators in the critical mission of nourishing our children. We adapted program rules to respond to extraordinary circumstances and provided operational flexibilities to simplify program administration and support social distancing.

WIC serves families at a time in life when proper nutrition is particularly important and highly specialized. Ensuring moms, babies, and young children can easily access WIC without interruption is critical for healthy pregnancies and births, and WIC helps lay a healthy foundation for infants and young children as they grow. To ensure these families did not lose access in the pandemic, we quickly adjusted requirements for the food package, the certification process, and how we provided nutrition education. Congress also increased WIC cash value vouchers for fruits and vegetables for moms and children.

In school meals, we provided operational flexibilities to support flexible meal service options like “grab and go” and parent pickup and flexibilities around meal pattern and nutrition requirements where needed. And, very importantly, supplemental appropriations and waiver authority provided by Congress have allowed us to provide additional funding by allowing schools to serve free meals to all students and increasing reimbursement rates. All told, we provided an estimated \$11 billion in additional funds for the past school year for school districts to maintain meal service in the face of significant obstacles.

Since March 2020, school nutrition and education professionals across the country have worked tirelessly to make sure that children have access to meals despite unprecedented challenges. They have utilized the tools we provided in remarkable ways to feed children-- delivering meals along school bus routes, allowing parents to pick up a weeks’ worth of meals at

a time, and entering into public-private partnerships to provide meals to children in rural areas. We all owe a debt of gratitude to the many thousands of dedicated school nutrition professionals and administrators who have spent, and continue to spend, long hours going above and beyond the call of duty so that kids can eat.

Overall, these efforts have made a huge difference and underscore how powerful the federal nutrition programs can be in response to hunger and hardship. But our work is not done—these programs are facing new challenges, and your support is more critical than ever. We have to work together to preserve and strengthen these programs going forward.

Child Nutrition Market Disruptions

Although nearly all schools are providing in-person instruction, supply chain disruptions, along with cost increases and labor challenges, have posed significant new challenges for schools. During this past school year, FNS surveyed all school districts nationwide to better understand the scale and nature of supply chain issues facing districts, and about 92 percent reported challenges due to supply chain disruptions. They reported facing challenges finding enough of the foods they need, hiring staff to operate the programs, and accommodating cost increases. We have engaged extensively with a range of stakeholders, including program operators, school food industry representatives, and others to understand the challenges they face daily on the ground, and we will continue this engagement as we look to how best to support them.

The nationwide waiver authority Congress provided for Child Nutrition Programs expires on June 30, 2022. We remain disappointed that Congress has not extended the waiver authority that would allow us to continue to provide much-needed resources and flexibilities to help schools and summer programs continue to provide nutritious meals to children despite major

ongoing challenges. We know that schools are still facing tremendous challenges and desperately still need stability and time to transition back to a non-pandemic school meals model. That is why we have asked Congress to extend the waiver authority through next year to support our schools through this challenging time.

To be sure, USDA is doing everything we can within the resources and authorities we have to help schools navigate the rocky terrain:

- Offering limited waivers under our permanent authority, like allowing schools and program operators to provide “grab and go” meals when needed due to COVID, allowing off-site monitoring reviews, and waiving some data reporting requirements;
- Making \$1.5 billion available to support school meals through USDA’s Commodity Credit Corporation, including \$300 million for states to purchase additional USDA Foods commodities for use in school food service, and \$200 million for the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program for states to purchase local food for schools;
- Collaborating with the Departments of Education and Treasury to highlight how state and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds provided to states and localities may be used to support school meals; and
- Streamlining the waiver request process to reduce burden on states.

But the reality is, without continued waiver authority, our toolkit is very limited. We will not be able to offer the full range of waivers—including providing all meals at higher reimbursement rates that are currently available to schools, child care providers, and summer meal providers. These waivers have provided schools with critical financial support to cover

their additional costs. We know that what we *are* able to offer simply does not address all of the challenges that schools and other operators will face.

Schools will face an abrupt return to standard program operations in the fall, along with a dramatic reduction in financial support. At the same time, schools are struggling to operate within a supply constrained marketplace, and increased labor costs or labor shortages. School meal programs traditionally operate on very tight margins and are struggling to find suppliers to continue to support them at affordable prices. School districts report major challenges with obtaining critical supplies and food items on a consistent basis with reliable delivery schedules. Some districts are getting no responses to bids for next year, and some suppliers are reportedly exiting the market.

Schools will also face transition challenges as they return to regular program operations, including uncertainty about participation levels as well as concern about rising unpaid meal debt associated with the return to meal applications.

Traditionally, we have seen strong bipartisan support for school meals. We hope that Members will return to the table to provide school meal programs the support they desperately need. We will certainly use every tool we have available to help, and we are committed to moving forward together to ensure kids get the nutritious meals they need and deserve.

Helping WIC Navigate Infant Formula Recall

Although not the focus of this hearing, I do want to address the FNS response to the current infant formula recall and its impact on WIC. From the moment we were alerted to the recall by our colleagues at the Food and Drug Administration, FNS has been working day and night as part of an all-of-government response to ensure that WIC families have access to infant formula during this time. Within three days of the recall, we issued more than 100 waivers to

allow WIC recipients to exchange recalled formula and access alternative products. The flexibility offered by these waivers provided encouragement and a basis for US manufacturers to quickly ramp up production and fill the gaps in the WIC market generated by the Abbott recall. In addition, due to USDA's efforts, Abbott agreed to offer rebates for all formula purchased in Abbott-contract states through the end of August. I want to thank this Committee for acting quickly to pass the bipartisan Access to Baby Formula Act, which has expanded our flexibility to deal with the current situation and provided us with permanent authority to respond to future emergencies. We will continue to work closely with our federal and private sector partners to prioritize WIC families in our response.

Improving Child Health and Nutrition Security through WIC and Child Nutrition.

The difficult circumstances we are all navigating together offer a unique opportunity for our country to build back better than ever before. I will turn to a few key efforts we are focused on to do just that.

Despite the formidable challenges in front of us, we have to continue working to strengthen WIC and the child nutrition programs in the long-term because we know, without a doubt, how critical healthy food is for kids.

Today, one in five American children are obese, and research shows that childhood obesity increases the likelihood of adult obesity and associated health risks, creating financial burdens on families and the health care system. Evidence shows that strong nutrition standards work, and we are building on the remarkable progress made over the past decade in supporting nutrition security for America's families.

We are currently in the process of updating the WIC food packages to include recommendations from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine's

scientific report and reflect the latest Dietary Guidelines. We will publish proposed regulations this year that are rooted in evidence and will ensure each WIC food package provides the highest level of nutrition for WIC families.

Together, we have made tremendous strides in child nutrition since the passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010. In fact, a study in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that during the past decade, school meals became the most nutritious source of meals for American children.

A USDA study found that, since meal standards were revised in 2012, school meals have gotten healthier and children are eating better in schools. Children who ate school lunches were more likely to consume milk, fruits, and vegetables and less likely to consume refined grains and empty calories than those who brought lunch from home. And, importantly, the study showed those gains were equitably distributed across sociodemographic groups.

Building on progress made on improving the nutrition standards of school meals, USDA will be proposing long-term updates to school meal nutrition standards in a way that puts children's health at the forefront and that is practical for schools. We have put into place transitional nutritional standards that provide stability and a clear path forward for schools as they rebound from the pandemic.

USDA is committed to continuing to bolster child nutrition through strong meal standards in a manner that is both science-based and achievable in the school environment. We are committed to providing the supports schools need to continue to provide the healthiest meals possible. We would welcome your partnership as we work to support schools and school nutrition professionals in this important endeavor. While it's not easy to change kids' eating

habits and schools face real challenges, the future payoffs of even incremental changes are extraordinary.

To this end, we recently announced the new \$100 million “Healthy Food Incentive Fund” as part of USDA’s Food System Transformation framework. It will support innovation and creativity in school districts, accelerating their efforts to improve the nutritional quality of school meals to children.

These efforts are central to our efforts to promote nutrition security—ensuring all Americans have consistent access to the safe, healthy, affordable food essential to optimal health and well-being.

Tackling the Summer Hunger Gap

When schools close for the summer, we know there is a summer hunger gap – hunger increases when children cannot access to school meals. Typically, fewer than 1 in 5 eligible children get meals through summer feeding programs. But we know how to solve this problem. Rigorous evaluation of summer EBT pilots showed compelling impacts. Summer EBT cuts the most severe form of childhood hunger by one-third. It is a model that works.

When the pandemic hit, Congress deployed this proven-effective model and created Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), a similar program that provides food dollars to families to make up for meals missed by free or reduced-price eligible children due to COVID. Thanks to extraordinary efforts by states, P-EBT has helped millions of children across the country. Congress also had the foresight to extend P-EBT into summer months, providing the opportunity to see the model work at full scale. For the first time last summer, resource-strapped families nationwide received EBT cards to buy groceries to provide meals for their children in the months when school is not in session.

But we know that summer hunger will not disappear when the public health emergency ends. That is why the President has proposed investing in making this proven-effective program permanent. This would dramatically reduce child hunger and ensure that we reach children without easy access to summer meal sites, as we see in many rural areas of the country. For the coming summer, we have streamlined the process to support states and territories in getting plans approved quickly to allow them to provide benefits for this summer. We received our first summer plan request on May 19, and, as of today, we have approved seven with more to expected in the coming days. Supporting states in this effort is one of FNS' top priorities.

Investing in WIC Innovation and Modernization

WIC is one of the nation's premier public health programs, helping pregnant women, infants, and young children access the healthy food and nutrition education they need to start their lives thriving. Despite its remarkable capacity however, only about half of those who are eligible participate in WIC. We know we have work to do – modernizing the program to improve the experience of participants through investments in technology and innovative approaches to both the clinic and shopping experiences, including pilots to enable participants to purchase WIC foods online, including infant formula.

Through the historic investment Congress made in the American Rescue Plan Act, FNS is implementing the *WIC Innovation and Modernization* effort, taking a close look at all aspects of the WIC program to ensure all eligible WIC families know about the program through improved communication channels and approaches and can access it easily through improved use of technology in the certification, nutrition education, and shopping experiences. We are doing this in a way that emphasizes equity, striving to break down some of the barriers that throughout

history have resulted in disparate health outcomes for people of color and other vulnerable populations.

FNS recently announced the Community Innovation and Outreach project. FNS and its nonprofit partner will develop innovative outreach strategies and test them at the local level to ensure we are reaching underserved populations effectively and in ways that resonate with their needs. This effort will complement a national public health campaign, focused on helping the public, including and pregnant women and mothers, better understand how WIC can improve their health and help them get healthy foods when they are pregnant and have young children. Through efforts like these, FNS is committing to reaching families by ensuring we are developing outreach and communication tools that speak to families' needs and experiences. In the coming months, we will take steps to improve the WIC shopping experience – in-store, at farmers' markets and expanding online shopping opportunities.

Conclusion

I know we share the same goal – ensuring that all children can get the healthy, nutritious food they need to thrive. This Subcommittee has a long history of bipartisan support for these programs, and I am eager to work with you to advance our shared goals and to build on the success of these programs through Child Nutrition Reauthorization. Thank you again for inviting me to join you today.