

**STATEMENT  
OF  
DORA RIVAS  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR  
MARCH 4, 2008**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. McKeon, thank you very much for the opportunity to participate in this important hearing. I am Dora Rivas, the Vice President of the School Nutrition Association, but I am appearing here today in my capacity as the Director of Child Nutrition for Dallas, Texas.

I would like to associate myself with the testimony of our President, Mary Hill. The standards issue that she addressed so well is a major concern to my colleagues all over the country. Further, as she mentioned there is a direct link between the nutrition standards and the economics of the program.

I am here, however to address the Hallmark/Westland Meat recall, and how the recent recall has affected us in Dallas, Texas. Our system is large; we have more than 215 schools. We have total student enrollment of more than 160,000 and our average daily participation in the school lunch program is more than 130,000 lunches with 50,000 breakfasts.

The magnitude of the recent Beef Recall has been a learning experience for USDA, FSIS, and all of us involved in responding to such an event. Food Service Directors across the country had the biggest challenge of taking prompt action and also had the direct responsibility of staying current on an evolving situation while at the same time assuring parents that school meals are safe and healthy for their children.

Since the recall started in January and until all products are properly disposed, we will be traveling uncharted territory in making sure we obtain all information from all sources that are available to us. I personally looked daily at the School Nutrition Association website,

newspaper, and watched for every email that had the subject title of “Beef Recall” to make sure I didn’t miss anything.

The greatest challenge was keeping up with the evolving magnitude of holding product subject to the food recall. We were first informed by the School Nutrition Association that the product being placed on hold was fine ground meat and processed products containing A608, fine ground beef from Westland. Not having the product in stock, we informed our Communications Department at the Dallas ISD that we did not have any of the product in question on our inventory. On Feb. 5<sup>th</sup>, we received further notice from the state commodity office that the recall included A594, Bulk Beef, which we did have and had diverted to Advance Foods to convert the ground beef into crumbles and steak fingers. We had that product in stock. We held our breath waiting for further instructions and then were made aware on Feb. 17<sup>th</sup> (a Sunday) that USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) released an announcement indicating a Class II recall by Hallmark/Westland Meat Packing Co.

On Feb. 19<sup>th</sup>, the SNA Website had information on the recall in question. On Feb. 20<sup>th</sup> at 1:15pm (2 days later) we received an URGENT USDA Recall message from the Regional Service Center. On Feb. 21, the Texas Department of Agriculture provided further guidance on disposal and some Q & A on reimbursement for some expenses. It is unfortunate that press release information went out for public release before official information and instructions arrived to food service directors via the USDA/State communications allowing little time to prepare for media and public response. This should be a lesson learned. Providing information to school districts first and then providing a Press Release on action taken would have been a much better situation for us. Having gone through the process of a major recall now gives us all the opportunity to develop formal detailed instructions for proper handling, disposal, and reimbursement for potential future incidents.

On Monday, Feb. 18<sup>th</sup> after the public release, our staff had begun reviewing the codes to see what was on our shelves. (Our 10 degree freezer is over 27,200 sq. feet in size.) By February 22nd we were able to pull more than 2500 cases of product, changed menu, and make food delivery adjustments.

It must be emphasized that to make an adjustment in a school district the size of Dallas is no small feat. Regular routes had to be set aside so that trucks could be dispatched to go to all 200+ schools and gather any product at school freezers immediately. Over 2000 cases had to be sorted and separated from regular stock. Many safeguards had to be taken to ensure there is no potential for accidentally pulling recalled product until it leaves our warehouse. However, as we were gathering all this information and responding to the recall, the media arrived at our warehouse interviewing staff on whether we had the recalled product in our warehouse. Our very capable staff was able to report that we had pulled all product from inventory and from schools and assured them of the safety of food supplied to our students. Hopefully, a recall of this magnitude does not happen again, however, if it does, using this experience will prepare us with pre-established procedures as a positive outcome from this very unfortunate event.

I can only image how difficult it must have been for smaller schools that do not have the staff of a large school system. It would be even more difficult for them to change the menu at short notice, and without a Communication's Office they are responding directly to the parents.

Our school meals have an exceptional safety record. We have not had a food-borne illness in the Dallas ISD, and in the many schools across the country. A greater emphasis on the safeguards schools utilize to ensure safe food is provided to our student customers would have also been of great benefit to our programs. Concerned parents called our office seeking reassurance. We have a HACCP program in place and all of our cafeteria supervisors are ServSafe certified. HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) systems are a comprehensive approach to food safety that follows the flow of food through a foodservice operation to eliminate or reduce the risk of food borne hazards. Among these procedures are examinations of foods as they are received by the kitchen and use of proper cooking and holding temperatures to ensure food is safe. In addition to the focus on potential risk, this would have been a great opportunity for support from USDA/States to educate the public on all of the safeguards in place.

Currently we are still sorting out the costs. On Feb. 21<sup>st</sup>, we received some reassurance that we would be reimbursed for some of our expenses. Our reimbursable costs are over \$114,000.00. Some of the non-reimbursable expenses we have incurred are overtime costs and administrative expenses. The district will have to absorb these costs, which total over \$2000. (100 hours of driver overtime X \$20.00/hour). Again, I am concerned about what happens in the small districts

where they do not have the resources to respond and absorb the costs. Also, while some of the costs are reimbursable, the school district must be able to advance the costs that will be reimbursed at some point later on.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions.