

2010 Interfaith Statement on Child Nutrition Reauthorization

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges ... you shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger.” (Leviticus 23:22).

Our shared scriptures teach us that we have a moral responsibility to feed the hungry; science tells us that access to adequate and nutritious food is necessary for all people to reach their God-given potential. Yet millions in the United States live on the brink of hunger. Nearly one in four children lives in a household that struggles to put food on the table.

The number of hungry children has increased as a result of the recession. Important provisions included in the economic recovery package are providing critical, immediate relief to families struggling against hunger. However, those provisions are temporary and are intended to address the rise in need resulting from higher unemployment and the weak economy. Long-term progress against hunger requires a long-term investment in both economic security and nutrition programs.

While hunger is a problem that affects people of all ages, it is particularly devastating for the more than 16.7 million children in its grasp. Childhood hunger and malnutrition impair proper physical development, generate behavioral issues like aggression and absenteeism, and cause emotional problems like anxiety and depression. Often overlooked are the effects of hunger on cognitive development, including decreased attention and lower test scores. The consequences of child hunger are broad and long-lasting and ultimately limit educational achievement and workforce productivity. Thus, there is both a moral and an economic imperative to address this problem.

We have the tools to end child hunger in America. Our failure to do so up to this point stems only from a lack of political will. Fortunately, President Obama has made two interlocking promises: to eliminate child hunger by 2015 and to halve poverty in 10 years. Child nutrition programs are the fastest, most direct way to reduce child hunger, and a strong Child Nutrition Reauthorization is the critical first step toward achieving the 2015 goal.

Child nutrition programs safeguard the well-being of America’s children by reducing hunger and increasing access to high-quality, nutritious foods. Programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), school breakfast and lunch programs, and preschool, summer and afterschool meal programs are vital in providing children the food they need for healthy development.

Unfortunately, these programs do not reach all children in need of food and quality nutrition. Many eligible children do not have access to programs or face other barriers to participation, whether because of unnecessarily burdensome administrative rules, confusing eligibility provisions that lack coordination with other agencies, or inadequate implementation in many states.

Child nutrition programs are only effective when they reach the children who need help. That is why our top priority for reauthorization is to improve access to and increase participation in these vital programs. A significant investment of new resources in these proven programs would help remove barriers to access and participation so all children in need can be served.

As communities of faith, we have a long history of working to fight hunger. We feed the hungry in our neighborhoods through food pantries, soup kitchens, and community outreach programs. While we will continue to do our part to feed our neighbors, we cannot match the role of government in assisting and supporting hungry people and addressing the root causes of hunger.

The undersigned members of the faith community therefore lay out the following priorities for a strong Child Nutrition Reauthorization:

Invest in Children: Congress must provide a substantial investment of new funding for child nutrition programs in the budget. A \$20 billion investment of new funds (or an additional \$4 billion per year) would enable authorizing committees to make critical improvements in these programs. Additionally, Congress must continue to fully fund WIC during the annual appropriations process to allow the program to serve all eligible women, infants, and children seeking enrollment.

Improve Access: Many families are unable to access benefits for which their children are eligible because not all programs operate in every community. We must improve access by increasing the number of breakfast, summer, and afterschool meal programs in operation and exploring alternative models to link children with the food they need when they are out of school:

- Provide outreach, technical assistance, and start-up funding to increase the number of breakfast, afterschool, and summer program sites.
- Support alternative Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) models to better connect eligible children with food in the summer.¹
- Expand the supper pilot in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) nationwide.
- Provide transportation assistance to help children access out-of-school feeding programs.
- Make it more appealing for sponsors to start or operate a program by simplifying administration and increasing reimbursement rates.

Increase Participation. Not all children who qualify for assistance enroll in the programs, often because of burdensome application procedures, social stigma, or other barriers to participation. We must simplify the eligibility determination and application process to make it easier for families to enroll children in these programs:

- Expand direct certification to include Medicaid and encourage states to maximize the use of direct certification to more seamlessly enroll children from families receiving SNAP, TANF, or Medicaid.
- Allow high-poverty schools to become hunger-free zones by offering free meals to all students and being reimbursed based on alternative data sources rather than individual applications.
- Reward states for increasing participation and program sites and reducing child hunger rates.
- Increase the certification period for children in the WIC program to one year.
- Improve outreach so eligible families are aware of what programs and benefits are available to them.

Improve Benefit Adequacy. Our first priority is ensuring that children have enough to eat, but more expensive nutritious foods like whole grains and fresh produce are essential to give children a healthy start. We must provide children not just with enough food, but the right food:

- Base nutrition standards for WIC food packages and school meals on scientific data from the Institute of Medicine and USDA's Dietary Guidelines.
- Provide funding to implement the full IOM recommendations for the WIC food package.
- Increase reimbursement rates to more accurately reflect the cost of a nutritious diet.
- Ensure that benefits keep pace with inflation, especially in years when food prices rise quickly.

¹ The FY10 agriculture appropriations bill included a pilot called for in the *2009 Interfaith Statement of Principles on Child Nutrition Reauthorization* to study alternative ways to feed children in school districts with limited or no access to SFSP sites. The bill provided \$85 million to study alternative summer models, such as providing a summer EBT card or increasing children's SNAP benefits in the summer. Congress should build on the results of the pilot to ensure that all eligible children have access to food assistance in the summer.

A strong Child Nutrition Reauthorization can enhance the lives of millions of children by promoting healthy development and improving educational outcomes. Critical new investments in these programs will put us on track to ending child hunger by 2015. We urge you to advocate for these and other policy provisions that would increase access to and participation in child nutrition programs so that all of America's children have the food they need.

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For more information contact Sophie Milam: 202-464-8126 or smilam@bread.org