

Early Education and Care: What is the Federal Government's Role?

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Testimony

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am Kate Coler, Deputy Under Secretary, Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

I am pleased to be at today's hearing to discuss the Federal Government's role in providing education and care to children under six years old. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is responsible for managing 15 domestic nutrition assistance programs. Its mission is to increase food security and reduce hunger in partnership with cooperating organizations by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education in a manner that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence. The President's budget for Fiscal Year 2006 demonstrates the Administration's unwavering commitment to this mission by requesting a record level of \$59 billion dollars in new budget authority to administer the nutrition assistance programs.

Over the past half-century, beginning with the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in 1946, the Nation has gradually built an array of unique nutrition assistance programs designed to help the most vulnerable populations meet their food needs. Taken together, the current programs form a nationwide safety net supporting low-income families and individuals in their efforts to escape food insecurity and hunger and achieve healthy, nutritious diets. These programs serve one in five Americans over the course of a year.

The nutrition assistance programs work both individually and in concert with one another to improve the Nation's nutrition and health by improving the diets of children and low-income households. These programs are based on the USDA and Department of Health and Human Services Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which are revised every five years to ensure Federal nutrition policy is based on current scientific and medical knowledge. Among the programs administered by FNS are:

- The Food Stamp Program (FSP): Authorized by the Food Stamp Act of 1977, the FSP serves as the centerpiece and primary source of nutrition assistance for over 25 million low-income people. It enables participants, over 50 percent of whom are children, to improve their diets by increasing food purchasing power using benefits that are redeemed at retail grocery stores across the country. State agencies are responsible for the administration of the program according to national eligibility and benefit standards set by Federal law and regulations. Benefits are 100 percent Federally-financed, while administrative costs are shared between the Federal and State governments. The FSP provides the basic nutrition assistance benefit for low-income people in the United States

while the other FNS programs supplement the program with benefits targeted to special populations, dietary needs, and delivery settings.

- Child Nutrition Programs (CNP): The NSLP, School Breakfast (SBP), Special Milk (SM), Child and Adult Care Food (CACFP), and Summer Food Service (SFSP) Programs provide reimbursement to State and local governments for nutritious meals and snacks served to over 30 million children in schools, child care institutions, after-school care programs, and adult day care centers. FNS provides cash reimbursement and commodities on a per-meal basis to offset the cost of food service at the local level as well as offset a significant portion of State and local administrative expense and provides training, technical assistance, and nutrition education. Reimbursements are substantially higher for meals served free or at a reduced price to children from low-income families.

- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): WIC addresses the special needs of at-risk, low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, infants, and children up to five years of age. It provides 8 million participants monthly with supplemental food packages targeted to their dietary needs, nutrition education, and referrals to a range of health and social services; benefits that promote a healthy pregnancy for mothers and a healthy start for their children. Appropriated funds are provided to States for food packages and nutrition services and administration for the program.

- The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP): This program provides food purchased by USDA to low-income infants and children up to age six, low-income pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women, and to low-income senior citizens who are residing in approved project areas. In recent years, there has been a shift towards low-income elderly in this program; in FY 2004, elderly participation comprised more than 88 percent of total participation.

Federal nutrition assistance programs operate as partnerships between FNS and State agencies and local organizations that interact directly with program participants. States voluntarily enter into agreements with the Federal Government to operate programs according to Federal standards in exchange for program funds that cover benefit costs, as well as a significant portion of administrative expenses.

Under these agreements, FNS is responsible for implementing statutory requirements that set national program standards for eligibility and benefits, providing Federal funding to State agencies and local partners, and monitoring and evaluating to make sure that program structure and policies are properly implemented and effective in meeting program missions. State agencies and local organizations are responsible for delivering benefits efficiently, effectively, and in a manner consistent with national requirements.

Our major goals in administering these programs are:

1. promoting access to and awareness of the programs so that eligible people can participate with dignity and respect;
2. building a HealthierUS with nutrition education and promotion to support healthy weight and healthful behaviors; and
3. enhancing the integrity with which our programs are administered.

In short, Mr. Chairman, these food assistance programs are primarily nutrition programs, helping participants obtain a better diet. They do not overlap with the education programs or with child care programs. They have a clear purpose and distinct function separate from, but complementary to, the goals of targeted education programs and general grants to provide child care services.

One program in particular that interfaces well with other programs that aid early childhood development is the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). CACFP plays a vital role in improving the quality of day care and making it more affordable for many low-income families. Each day, 2.9 million children receive nutritious meals and snacks through CACFP. CACFP reaches even further to provide meals to children residing in homeless shelters, and snacks and suppers to youths participating in eligible after-school care programs.

I would like to explain how the CACFP works.

FNS administers CACFP through grants to States. The program is administered within most States by the State educational agency. In a few States, it is administered by an alternate agency, such as the State health or social services department; and in Virginia, it is directly administered by the FNS Mid-Atlantic Regional Office. The child care component and the adult day care component of CACFP may be administered by different agencies within a State, at the discretion of the Governor.

Independent centers and sponsoring organizations enter into agreements with their administering State agencies to assume administrative and financial responsibility for CACFP operations. CACFP reimbursements pay for nutritious meals and snacks served to eligible children and adults who are enrolled for care at participating child care centers, day care homes, and adult day care centers.

Eligible public or private nonprofit child care centers, outside-school-hours care centers, Head Start programs, and other institutions which are licensed or approved to provide day care services may participate in CACFP, independently or as sponsored centers. Meals served to children are reimbursed at rates based upon a child's eligibility for free, reduced price, or paid meals. Under certain rules, for-profit centers may also qualify for this program.

When many people think of "day care" they envision the day care center, in a more formalized setting than a neighbor's home. However, a significant portion of the meals reimbursed in the CACFP are in fact provided by Family Day Care Homes. Let me speak for a moment about how this part of the program works.

A family or group day care home must sign an agreement with a sponsoring organization to participate in CACFP. Day care homes must be licensed or approved by appropriate State agencies to provide day care services. Reimbursement for meals served in day care homes is based upon eligibility criteria established in statute.

The reason I have provided this background is to point out that the grants for this

program are not education programs per se nor are they grants to provide child care. However, we do work with our State partners and our Federal partners to make sure that the nutrition programs work together with other resources to provide the best environment possible for young children in day-care settings.

The Food and Nutrition Service is proud of our efforts to coordinate with other federal agencies to ensure that federal funds are used to maximize benefit delivery. We have worked closely with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Department of Education (DoE) to ensure that the benefits provided under the Child Nutrition Programs are fully integrated into the Head Start Program and the Even Start Program. In fact, Head Start notified Head Start centers of the advisability of participating in the meal services offered under Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). By using CACFP funds to support their food service, Head Start funds that were available for food service are freed for use in important educational activities. Program regulations ensure that children in Head Start and Even Start families are automatically eligible for free meals when they participate in the Child Nutrition Programs. We have worked closely with the Department of Education's 21st century schools to ensure that these programs are aware of the snack service available under the National School Lunch Program. All of our programs, including the WIC Program, have a long history of working with our counterparts in other agencies to ensure that the nutritional assistance offered through the Food and Nutrition Service complements their early education efforts.

In summary, the FNS mission is to provide nutrition assistance in a variety of settings, but not to interfere with nor duplicate the efforts of other Federal and state programs that provide education or child care services. On the contrary, FNS programs enable other programs to operate better by making sure that young children have access to proper nutrition and are ready to learn.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have at this time.