

CAHS

Connecticut Association for Human Services
110 Bartholomew Avenue, Suite 4030
Hartford, CT 06106-2201
www.cahs.org

Robert A. Solomon, President
James P. Horan, Executive Director
(860) 951-2212
(860) 951-6511 fax

**Testimony of Tracy Helin, Outreach Director
Connecticut Association for Human Services, Hartford, CT
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My name is Tracy Helin. I am the Outreach Director for the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS). CAHS has advocated for Connecticut's lower income residents since 1910, and has made efforts to reduce the causes and effects of poverty, while working to improve the human services delivery system at the state, regional, and national levels.

CAHS operates outreach programs for several of the Child Nutrition Programs and other nutrition programs, with a concentration on Food Stamps and the Summer Food Service Program. The Child Nutrition Programs play a critical role in ensuring that the nutritional needs of all households are met, and address the needs of children during the most important time in their lives.

My comments focus broadly on improving access to all of the CNPs, simplifying program procedures, allowing programs to be more widely available through information sharing, and more specific recommendations to improve the SFSP. These comments are based on CAHS's experiences with potential applicants through various outreach programs over the past ten-plus years.

I plan to submit more extensive written comments through the web portal, and also add my support to the comments that will be submitted by the Northeast Regional Anti-hunger Network later this year.

The Summer Food Service Program

My comments regarding the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) focus on improving access for children, improving meal quality, and increasing funding to allow for outreach and for more sponsors to participate.

1. Improve SFSP Access:

Expand the open-site eligibility threshold from areas where 50% of the children are eligible for free or reduced meals to areas where 40% of the children are eligible for free or reduced meals: Lowering the SFSP open-site eligibility to 40% will allow the Program to serve more children who truly need the program during the summer months. This would help compensate for the fact that school meal applications often do not accurately reflect the economic condition of the surrounding neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income families. This is particularly common in large, rural areas served by a single school district. This situation also affects larger cities where only one or two schools do not fall into the "50% or more" category. When only one

or two schools in a sponsor's area are above 40% but below 50%, an otherwise needy, but ineligible area is created. Sponsors often comment that paperwork and staffing are the main obstacles to opening more sites. The verification paperwork for closed or enrolled sites is enough to deter a sponsor from serving an area. Lowering area eligibility to 40% will simplify the program for large city sponsors and allow rural sponsors to serve more areas.

According to recent data from the Food Research and Action Center, an additional 210,000 children in the USDA's Northeast region would be served daily if the open site area eligibility were lowered to 40%. That figure represents approximately a 50% increase in the number of children being served by the program in the Region.

Lengthen the time allowed for meal service: This would eliminate the requirement for sponsors to obtain waivers for extended meal service. Sponsors serving large numbers of children often need more than two hours to distribute lunches.

Establish a pilot program to encourage innovative approaches to increasing access in rural areas, including potential for transportation reimbursement: This would address a population that is seriously under-served by the program. The transportation aspect would reimburse sponsors for the cost of transporting meals and/or children to summer food programs. Rural sponsors have a difficult time reaching and/or attracting children to open sites.

Provide waivers to allow certain children to take SFSP meals off site: These waivers would allow more low-income children to participate in the SFSP and gain access to the nutrition they need. Waivers would apply to children who are caretakers of elderly family members or those who are employed during the summer months. These waivers would also benefit sponsors lacking adequate space for congregate dining.

2. Improve meal quality

Tie increased meal reimbursements to meal quality improvements.

3. Increase funding for Program enhancements

Increase reimbursement rates: Under the current rates, many sponsors must operate at a deficit, due to food and labor costs. This makes it difficult to attract and retain sponsors. I understand that sponsors are not allowed to profit from the program, but many private, for-profit companies manage school food service programs. Common sense would tell us that it is highly unlikely to attract any of these companies into a money-losing program.

Given that the costs of food, labor, fuel, and all related services have grown tremendously since the Child Nutrition Programs were last reauthorized in 2004, a new sponsor reimbursement rate is essential to sponsor retention and recruitment.

Provide funds for outreach: Underutilization of summer food programs may be attributed largely to a lack of public awareness about the program and an insufficient number of programs. Outreach is necessary in order to expand the program and increase child participation. Current state and

county administrative agencies work closely with community partners to expand program access and strategize about outreach efforts, but funds and time are extremely limited.

Outreach is a proven, successful method for increasing program participation. Several organizations in the Region perform some type of outreach activity, but often do so through private fundraising efforts. A privately-funded campaign by several Northeastern states has resulted in doubling of meals and children served in their target communities. Clearly, outreach can benefit more communities, but funds are limited. Federally-funded outreach activities would surely produce a more uniform message and result in program expansion across the nation, as opposed to the limited areas where local organizations are able to fund themselves.

Additional Comments:

Thank you very much for providing me with the opportunity to present these suggestions, and for holding these forums.