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for the

Committee on State and Federal Legislation

on

Resolution 79-2010

**Calling on the United States Congress to Renew and
Strengthen the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act**

May 3, 2010

on behalf of

Food Bank For New York City

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon. The Food Bank appreciates the opportunity to present testimony today to the City Council regarding Resolution 79 of 2010, introduced by Speaker Quinn, which calls on Congress to renew and strengthen the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act.

First, the Food Bank thanks the Speaker and the City Council for your ongoing efforts to address the issue of hunger, as well as the lack of financial and geographic access to healthy food with which far too many New Yorkers contend. It is fitting that such a statement of priorities to improve federal child nutrition programs should come from this body.

Food Bank For New York City works to end food poverty by increasing access to nutrition, education and financial empowerment. We distribute food and provide support services to approximately 1,000 emergency and community food programs citywide; manage nutrition education programs for schools and CBOs; operate benefits access programs including food stamp outreach and enrollment assistance, and the largest Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

tax assistance program in the country; and conduct research to inform community and government efforts to end hunger in New York City.

On March 17, 2010, Senator Blanche Lincoln, Chair of the Agriculture Committee, introduced the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the first draft of legislation to reauthorize the federal child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 contains some promising improvements for these programs, which, like provisions for universal school meals models, could help lift millions of children out of food insecurity. Unfortunately, the Senate legislation provides insufficient funding to realize the full potential of these improvements, and worse, it takes money away from other nutrition programs to pay for them.

Our testimony today will key in on these issues.

FOOD POVERTY DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTS CHILDREN

Food poverty is a problem that disproportionately impacts children, and households with children. The number of people living in poverty throughout the U.S reached 39.8 million (13.2 percent) in 2008, the highest number since 1960. Among children, however, 19 percent, or 14 million, were living in poverty.¹ Throughout the nation, 15 percent of households (17 million) are food insecure – meaning they lack access to nutritionally adequate diets, i.e., they are consuming insufficient amounts of food and/or food of reduced quality. Among households with children, however, the percentage rises to 21.0.²

The local data bear this out. Among the 1.9 million children in New York City under age 18, just more than 500,000 live below poverty (26.5 percent).³ Research conducted in October 2009 by the Food Bank and Marist College Institute for Public Opinion shows that 40 percent of New York City residents, 3.3 million, were experiencing difficulty affording food. Nevertheless, the poll showed almost one-half (47 percent) of households with children experiencing this hardship.⁴ Households with children constitute 40 percent of New York City residents relying on food pantries and soup kitchens for food.⁵

The federal child nutrition programs, designed to provide nutritious food for the children with the poorest access to it, constitute a targeted intervention to address this problem. Nevertheless, barriers to access in these programs – including excessive documentation requirements and flaws in program design and implementation – prevent them from reaching their full potential. The Child Nutrition Reauthorization process, which occurs once every five years, presents the best opportunity to eliminate these barriers and maximize the reach of these programs. The most promising measures in this reauthorization cycle would create provisions for universal school meals, whereby students in high-need schools would receive free school meals without the burden of an inefficient and intrusive application process. The government would assume

¹ Community Population Survey. (2008). U.S. Census Bureau.

² Nord, M., Andrews, M. and Carlson, S. Household Food Insecurity in the United States, 2008. (November 2009). U.S. Department of Agriculture.

³ American Community Survey, U.S. Census, 2008.

⁴ *NYC Hunger Experience 2009*. Food Bank For New York City.

⁵ *NYC Hunger Safety Net 2007*. Food Bank For New York City.

this burden, depending instead on reliable government data (census data, enrollment in public benefits, etc.) to determine eligibility within student populations.

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS BY ANY NAME WILL REDUCE CHILD HUNGER

The National School Lunch Program, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), provides monetary reimbursements to public and non-profit private schools for providing nutritious lunch to enrolled students. Reimbursements are based on the number of meals served to children who qualify for free, reduced-price and full-price lunch. As a federal entitlement program, funding for the program is guaranteed by the federal government for every participating child.

Currently, to determine whether a child is eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch, schools must collect and verify applications from families each year (in some schools, once every four years) that attest to household size and income. Eligibility for free meals is capped at an annual household income of 130 percent of poverty guidelines (\$24,352 for a household of three); for reduced-price meals, the household income threshold is 185 percent of poverty (\$33,874 for a household of three). As of the end of the last school year (June 2009), three quarters (75 percent), or more than 750,000 of the more than one million students in New York City's public school system, had submitted documentation that rendered them eligible for free or reduced-price meals.⁶

Unfortunately, even at this high percentage, the application process is likely to produce an underestimate of actual need: missing or incomplete applications, or applications not properly filled out, result in children miscategorized for full-price meals even when their household income qualifies them for free or reduced-price meals. Language barriers, misperceptions about the use of household information in the applications and other factors can lead to non-submission of forms from low-income households.

In addition, stigma plays a role in depressing participation, particularly among older students. Because in most schools, money is collected at the end of the lunch line, many students refuse to eat school meals because the process identifies them by their household poverty. Indeed, the differences in participation are stark: approximately 35 percent of last year's high school students ate a school lunch on any given day; as elementary school students, however, that same cohort's average daily participation was 83 percent.⁷

With the recession forcing many New York City families into greater financial need and widespread child obesity – nearly half of public school students in New York City are overweight or obese⁸ – too many children are failing to receive the healthy, nutritious school lunch available to them at little to no cost. In fact, 32 percent of the students eligible for free or reduced-price meals in New York City do not participate in the program.⁹

Replacing individual applications with a rigorous analysis of reliable government data on income and household composition (from Census records, enrollment in public benefits, etc.) to determine the student population's eligibility for free and reduced-priced lunch in schools would

⁶ Food Bank analysis of New York City Department of Education Office of SchoolFood data, June 2009.

⁷ Food Bank analysis of New York City Department of Education Office of SchoolFood data, 2002-2009.

⁸ *Obesity Begins Early: Findings Among Elementary School Children in New York City*. (2003). New York City Department of Health.

⁹ Food Bank analysis of New York City Department of Education Office of SchoolFood data, June 2009.

effectively provide for universal school meals in all participating schools and school districts without requiring an application from a single student – a change that will radically expand access, alter the way school meals programs are administered and perceived, and bring federal dollars into local schools and communities. Sometimes termed “paperless eligibility and accountability,” “alternative counting and claiming,” or even “the paperless lunchroom,” this more streamlined, cost-effective, accurate method of accounting for eligibility for free and reduced-price meals in the City’s schools would result in getting more meals to children. In participating elementary through high schools, for example, New York City’s own experience with a short-term universal meals model (Provision 2 of the NSLP), has resulted in a 68 percent increase in participation.¹⁰

The “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” creates two models for universal school meals: by indexing it to the proportion of students receiving free school meals through direct certification – a process whereby children in households receiving food stamps (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) automatically qualify for free school meals; and by authorizing pilots to create a demographically based statistical profile of income distribution within school populations to determine eligibility and federal reimbursement amounts.

Both models would take the paperwork burden off families and use reliable government data that already exists and is already being collected on a regular basis – a smart and efficient use of government resources – but both models should be strengthened and improved in the course of revisions to the Child Nutrition Reauthorization legislation so as to maximize participation.

The legislation expands direct certification to foster children, and to children in income-eligible households receiving Medicaid – expansion of direct certification will certainly make the universal meals model predicated on direct certification all the more impactful. As written, however, expansion of direct certification to Medicaid households would be phased in as a pilot small enough in scope that it would render New York City ineligible simply on the basis of its size. Moreover, the federal reimbursement amounts for universal school meals indexed to the proportion of directly certified students are not sufficient to allow large numbers of high-need schools in New York City to participate in universal school meals in a financially viable way.

In addition, the provision for universal school meals based on statistical modeling of demographic data can be strengthened by expressly permitting the use of additional data sources, such as local tax data, that would be useful in creating reliable household income estimates of student populations. As currently written, the language is non-specific as to the use of data other than Census data.

The Food Bank thanks the Speaker and the City Council for supporting similar provisions in earlier child nutrition bills, and for including this in Resolution 79 of 2010, and encourages your continued advocacy during the course of the legislative process to see these provisions strengthened and expanded in a way that will benefit low-income children and families in New York City and across the country.

CHILD NUTRITION REAUTHORIZATION NEEDS THE *RIGHT* FUNDING

In order to see these recommendations and other improvements in the “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” become a reality, Congress needs to provide more funding. As written, the bill not

¹⁰ Food Bank analysis of participation data received from NYC Department of Education, School Years 2003 through 2008.

only significantly underfunds Child Nutrition Reauthorization, it pulls funding from other nutrition programs to do it.

The “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” provides an additional \$450 million per year over ten years to child nutrition programs – less than half the \$1 billion per year called for by President Obama, and little more than ten percent of the amount (\$4 billion per year) identified by the Food Bank, the New York City Alliance for Child Nutrition Reauthorization, the Food Research and Action Center and other anti-hunger organization as necessary to adequately address child hunger in the United States.

Adding insult to injury, the bill proposes to offset this new funding by slashing \$1.2 billion from the nutrition education component of the federal food stamp program (the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program-Education, or SNAP-Ed) over the next decade, effectively capping nutrition education programs for SNAP-eligible children, teens and adults nationwide for the next ten years.

The Food Bank is one of New York City’s main providers of SNAP-Ed nutrition education for children and families. Our CookShop program reaches over 15,000 children, teens and adults in New York City public schools with an experiential, hands-on workshops and activities that teach cooking skills and nutrition information, and foster enthusiasm for fresh, affordable fruits, vegetables, legumes and grains. Using a train-the-trainer model, we develop local knowledge and expertise in food and nutrition issues by providing more than 700 public school teachers with the training, resources and equipment to bring CookShop’s weekly cooking lessons and activities into their classrooms. Through social marketing, we are using diverse media to reach approximately 100,000 low-income teens with messages about healthy food choices.

We are not the only SNAP-Ed provider in New York – other organizations, like Cornell University’s Cooperative Extension Program and the New York City and State Departments of Health, bring nutrition education to community events, early childcare settings, emergency food programs and other venues. The funding cap proposed by the “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” would stop any of these activities from expanding to reach more eligible New Yorkers.

Moreover, the bill would disproportionately hurt New York by freezing SNAP-Ed funding at its current levels, which currently provide New York with about one-fourth the funding per person as California, despite the fact that it is home to nearly as many food stamp recipients. As it is currently administered, SNAP-Ed is limited only by the State and local resources that can support it. Capping SNAP-Ed would eliminate any potential to reach funding parity and provide as many low-income New Yorkers as possible with the information and resources to make the best food choices possible under limited budgets.

Underfunding the programs that serve our nation’s most high-need students guarantees that they will not be successful. And cannibalizing funds from SNAP-Ed undermines federal priorities to end child hunger by 2015, prevent childhood obesity and promote child nutrition — the very purpose of the bill itself.

Supporters of this measure point to the creation of a new nutrition education program in the “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” as an expansion of nutrition education. As detailed in the bill, this new program would be implemented in much the same way as SNAP-Ed, creating a duplicative process that parallels what is already in existence – the very picture of government inefficiency.

In this respect, the “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” simply robs Peter to pay Paul. Our legislators must adequately fund Child Nutrition Reauthorization without undermining programs that already serve the people they seek to help.

We understand the Speaker and the City Council oppose the SNAP-Ed offsets and appreciate the online petition to our legislators that highlights this position. We ask for your continued support on this issue as the Child Nutrition legislation moves forward.

SUMMARY

The opportunity to significantly improve the programs on which millions of U.S. children rely for food comes only once every five years. The “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” contains some promising improvements but significant flaws. The Food Bank support the priorities outlined in Resolution 79 of 2010 and calls on the City Council to continue its advocacy for a Child Nutrition Reauthorization that expands access to child nutrition programs without sacrificing other nutrition programs to do so.