

April 9, 2021

To Members of Congress:

We, the undersigned organizations, write to urge Congress to support child nutrition programs that ensure vulnerable families receive nutritious meals for their children during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. We appreciate that support for school kitchen infrastructure updates was included in the American Jobs Plan, but more must be done.

Building on the important investments from the American Rescue Plan Act, the upcoming infrastructure package provides an important opportunity so that no child is hungry and all children have the nutrition they need to grow up healthy. Critical investments in child nutrition programs will provide much-needed economic relief to struggling families and support local economies by providing and maintaining jobs—particularly for professionals working to serve healthy meals to students—and improve schools by upgrading school kitchen equipment and infrastructure. Healthy school meals can reduce socio-economic disparities in access to healthy food and childhood obesity that likely has only grown since the pandemic.

We welcome U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack's priorities to address both food *and* nutrition insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for and importance of strong nutrition policies that improve children's access to healthy meals and address health disparities exacerbated by this crisis. Specifically, we ask the following priorities be included in the next recovery package, as well as other legislative vehicles and administrative action where possible:

School meals

Provide healthy school meals for all. School meals reduce childhood hunger; decrease childhood overweight and obesity; improve diet quality for children; and supports child development, wellness, and school readiness. Many children from struggling families do not qualify for free school meals, and school meal fees create a barrier to participation. Offering school meals to all enrolled students eliminates the cost barrier for children whose families' income is near the cutoff line to receive free school meals or for families whose income fluctuates throughout the year. Healthy school meals for all reduces the paperwork burden for families and schools; eliminates the stigma of being singled out for receiving school meal assistance; and helps programs return to fiscal solvency. Providing healthy school meals for all is universally supported by school food service directors and school-based groups, along with the nutrition and anti-hunger community. The nationwide waivers are currently set to expire September 30, 2021. Within the waivers, schools should be encouraged to provide free meals through the National School Lunch Program's Seamless Summer Option, which has stronger nutrition standards, than through the Summer Food Service Program. Congress must make this critical investment in the school nutrition programs permanent.

Restore and strengthen science-based nutrition standards. Given that the pandemic has worsened the childhood obesity crisis, school meal nutrition standards need to be strong and evidence-based now more than ever. Schools are currently required to meet the nutrition standards rule from 2012 (77 FR 4088, January 26, 2012); however, the rule is now outdated with the latest nutrition science. The USDA must initiate a rulemaking to: update the timeline for meeting the sodium-reduction targets and craft a fourth reduction target to align with the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA); restore the 100 percent whole-grain-rich requirement; and restore the limit on flavored 1 percent (low-fat) milk or implement a calorie limit consistent with expert recommendations. USDA must also establish an added sugars standard

for school meals and replace the total sugar standard with an added sugars standard for competitive foods consistent with the DGA.

Commit to serving nutritious meals during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, Congress provided USDA the authority to waive nutrition standards as appropriate to accommodate supply chain disruptions related to COVID-19. However, USDA released a memo in August 2020 that notified schools that they no longer needed to document food system disruptions, which is inconsistent with federal law. We must ensure that school meals remain nutritious, particularly through the pandemic and economic downturn, as they may be the only healthy meals children receive each day. In addition, knowing what challenges schools are facing allows USDA to provide technical assistance where appropriate and help schools transition back to meeting the meal patterns when schools go back to in-person learning. USDA must restore the requirement that schools document hardship for use of these waivers.

Provide funding relief for school nutrition and the Child and Adult Care Food programs to cover costs incurred during the pandemic response. School nutrition and childcare programs rely on reimbursement from meal service to pay for expenses. Many school districts and childcare sites across the country maintained the same or incurred more expenses than normal (e.g. labor, transportation) while seeing a significant decrease in revenues from reduced meal participation. We appreciate that the several COVID relief packages provided funding for school foodservice authorities and childcare institutions to help cover COVID-related emergency operational costs from March-June 2020, making up for budget shortfalls due to pandemic-related low child nutrition program participation. However, more is needed to sustain these essential feeding programs, including extending the relief funding through at least June 2021.

Increase reimbursements for school meals. Congress must increase reimbursement for the school meal programs. USDA estimates that school meal costs exceed reimbursement by, on average, 49 cents per lunch and 84 cents per breakfast (based on USDA's School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, data taken from school year 2014-2015). In addition to increasing reimbursement for meals, Congress should increase the performance-based reimbursement schools receive when meeting the updated nutrition standards under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (currently an additional seven cents, adjusted annually for inflation) and for high-poverty schools (currently an additional two cents). Increased reimbursement for breakfast is particularly important because breakfast did not receive an increase under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (the seven-cent increase is for lunch only). Increased funding for breakfast could be done through reimbursement or the establishment of a USDA Foods (commodity) entitlement. Congress should also establish the same reimbursement for the National School Lunch Program's Seamless Summer Option as the Summer Food Service Program.

Provide \$1 billion for USDA School Kitchen Equipment Grants. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has placed a spotlight on the central role of schools in feeding our nation's children and school nutrition leaders across the country have stepped up to nourish their communities. This spotlight has also illuminated the need for further investment to ensure schools are supported throughout the entirety of this public health emergency and well-positioned to recover after the pandemic. One such area is the need for investment in our school kitchen equipment and infrastructure. The pandemic has also shown that many schools may not have been set up with proper equipment to respond to emergency feeding situations as they transitioned to curbside and delivery feeding. Providing additional funding will help schools acquire adequate equipment such as mobile serving carts and coolers, and to adapt to these emergency scenarios

or longer-term alternative meal service. By increasing funding for these grants, Congress can ensure schools have the resources they need to support and strengthen their meal service infrastructure in the face of financial uncertainty. In addition, these funds will be spent in local economies to support jobs and companies that manufacture and install the equipment, as well as updating wiring and electrical for schools. With school nutrition on the frontlines of response now and to prepare them for future, we urge Congress to provide \$1 billion or \$100 million per year over ten years in funding for school kitchen equipment grants.

EBT benefits

Support Pandemic EBT (P-EBT). The P-EBT program has provided families with resources to purchase food to replace meals that children would have received through the child nutrition programs during normal times. We strongly supported provisions in the American Rescue Plan Act that extended the P-EBT program through the length of the public health emergency and the administration's increase in benefits to cover an additional snack. Going forward, EBT benefits should be provided to families who receive free or reduced-price school meals whenever schools are closed during summer vacation, on weekends, for school holidays, and for unexpected closures.

Support for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program

Sustain increases in the value and nutritional quality of the WIC food packages. WIC is an effective program that enhances children's diet quality, improves pregnancy and birth outcomes, and closes racial disparities for maternal health, breastfeeding, and child nutrition. The White House's proposed \$3 billion in WIC improvements is the definition of building back better, an essential step in improving the nation's maternal, infant, and child health. Building on the initial investments in the American Rescue Plan Act, we are requesting an additional \$2.2 billion in funding for multi-year food costs and ongoing authority to maintain increased values for WIC's fruit and vegetable benefit. These actions would support heightened benefit levels throughout the pandemic as USDA transitions through formal rulemaking to a higher-value food benefit to enhance WIC families' access to healthy foods in the long-term.

SNAP Nutrition Education

Increase state grants by five percent for the SNAP Obesity Prevention and Nutrition Education Grant Program (SNAP-Ed). SNAP-Ed is an evidence-based program that helps SNAP participants lead healthier lives. In addition to the SNAP benefit boost that provides critical assistance to participants and supports local economies, an increase in SNAP-Ed is needed to increase nutrition education efforts, social marketing campaigns, and improve policies, systems, and the environment of the community both during and after the pandemic.

Sincerely,

1,000 Days

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK)
Advocates for Better Children's Diets
Alliance for a Healthier Generation
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Heart Association
American Public Health Association

American Society for Nutrition
ASAP (Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project)
Association of SNAP Nutrition Education Administrators (ASNNA)
Association of State Public Health Nutritionists
Balanced
Boulder County Public Health
Center for Science in the Public Interest
ChangeLab Solutions
Child Welfare League of America
Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition (WA State)
Children's Healthy Weight Research Group
Colorado Children's Campaign
Community Food Advocates NYC
Consumer Federation of America
Duke World Food Policy Center
Earthjustice
Educational Sustainability Mobilization Inc.
First Focus Campaign for Children
FLIPANY
Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
FoodCorps
Friends of the Earth U.S.
Healthy Schools Campaign
Indy Hunger Network
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Jump IN for Healthy Kids
Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy
LunchAssist
March of Dimes Inc
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
Minority Women's Health Alliance
Mom Congress
MomsRising
Montgomery County Food Council
National Action Against Obesity
National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
National Association of County and City Health Officials
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Athletic Trainers' Association
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)
National Education Association
National PTA
National WIC Association
North Carolina Alliance for Health
North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc.
Nourish Colorado
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine

Real Food for Kids
Save the Children Action Network (SCAN)
Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior
Society of State Leaders of Health and Physical Education
The Children's Agenda
The Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger
The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina
The Food Trust
The Nourished Principles
Trust for America's Health
U.S. Breastfeeding Committee
Union of Concerned Scientists
Urban School Food Alliance
WNC Bridge Foundation