

First Five Years Fund

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chairman
Senate Committee on Agriculture
Nutrition and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20150

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Agriculture
Nutrition and Forestry
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Roberts and Senator Stabenow:

I am writing to express the First Five Years Fund's (FFYF) support for strengthening and expanding the Child Nutrition Act (CNA) to better serve the nation's youngest learners and their families. 90% of physical brain growth occurs during a child's first five years of life. Motor skills, learning, analyzing, vocabulary, speech and social development are made possible through 700 new connections every second between neurons in the brain during the first three years of life. Adequate nutrition plays a critical role in early childhood development and learning, and promotes improved, life-long health outcomes. As a result the next CNA will not only impact the academic and life success of millions of individuals Americans, but also profoundly influence the country's long-term educational and economic vitality.

FFYF supports the high nutritional standards established by the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 and encourages you to maintain a federal commitment to nutritional quality in the next CNA. Early childhood education and childcare programs are important settings for providing children with nutritious meals, snacks, and beverages. Federal law should continue to prioritize efforts to ensure our young learners living in poverty have tools necessary to develop along a continuum consistent with their peers and arrive ready for success on the first day of Kindergarten.

In addition to maintaining existing law's nutritional standards, we urge you to consider the following recommendations for strengthening the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC):

Child and Adult Care Food Program

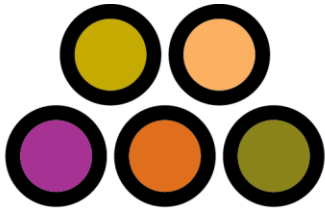
- Reduce the program's area eligibility test to forty percent of residents living below the federal poverty line. Childcare providers should receive the higher Tier I reimbursement if 40 percent of the children in the neighborhood are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. CACFP's current fifty percent threshold does not align with the poverty requirements of other major federal education programs (e.g., Title I of the Elementary

and Secondary Education Act) and decreases childcare and other early learning setting participation rates. This suggested change would ensure that more young children benefit from this important safety net.

- Expand the program to cover three meals per day at all sites and increase the program's reimbursement rates. One additional meal would better meet children's needs, given that many CACFP eligible families are working longer and nontraditional hours. Children present in childcare and educational settings for extended hours (more than 8 hours) should have access to nutritional meals throughout the day. Increasing reimbursement rates will curb participation declines, and enable early childhood education and childcare providers to expand services – at appropriately high nutritional standards – to more eligible children. Increasing access and consumption of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lower-fat dairy products among young children is critical to their development.
- Require a USDA CACFP paperwork reduction initiative including an emphasis on maximizing technology use. The next reauthorization should aim to streamline program requirements, reduce paperwork, and use technology as a tool for improving program access and participation.

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

- Expand WIC's benefits and ensure program requirements maximize nutritional value without creating unnecessary costs for families. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has an enormous impact on child health. Research shows that young children receiving SNAP benefits are less likely to be at developmental risk, in fair or poor health, and overweight, and they have fewer hospitalizations than comparable non-participants. Benefits are simply not adequate, however, to meet families' monthly nutritional needs. This shortfall is in large part a result of inadequate federal investments, but also due to some program requirements. For example, SNAP benefits should be calculated with reference to the cost of the low-cost food plan rather than the inadequate Thrifty Food Plan.
- Continue WIC's existing eligibility rules and nutritional support, so that women, infants, and young children continue to experience the full complement of the program's health benefits. The program's promotion of access to supplemental nutritional foods, nutrition education and counseling at WIC clinics, and screening and referrals to other health, welfare and social services are absolutely critical to low income families. Congress should seek to expand, not decrease, access to this effective program.



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- Improve integration and alignment of childcare investments and programs with WIC. Evidence shows that the absence of affordable childcare is a barrier to stable employment and earning a living wage. Congress's recent update to the Child Care and Development Block Grant program offers a new chance to better address this challenge and creates a timely opportunity for strategically integrating child care with WIC to reach greater number of children and families that require nutritional help.

FFYF appreciates this opportunity to comment on the committee's CNA reauthorization process and would be pleased to serve as resource to your and your staffs regarding the reauthorization's implications for early learning and childcare programs.

Sincerely,

Kris Perry
Executive Director

Discussion Draft