

Testimony of Ellie Krieger
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House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry

Hearing on Access to Healthy Foods for Beneficiaries of Federal Nutrition Programs

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Good Morning Chairman Baca, Ranking Member Fortenberry, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Ellie Krieger, and I believe I have a uniquely multi-faceted perspective to offer you on the issue of childhood nutrition and wellness.

Professionally, I am a registered dietitian and host of *Healthy Appetite* on Food Network. I received my undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in nutrition from Cornell and Columbia Universities. I held the position of director of nutritional services at the prestigious La Palestra Center for Preventative Medicine, where I worked with a team of physicians, psychologists and fitness specialists to create a holistic obesity treatment program. And I was an adjunct professor of nutrition education at the New York University Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health.

In addition, I regularly speak at events around the country and have appeared as a guest expert on dozens of programs including Today, CNN, Good Morning America, The Dr. Oz Show, and others. I am a regular contributor to Fine Cooking, Woman's Health and Food Network magazines. And I have written three books on healthy living and cooking, Small Changes, Big Results; The Food You Crave; and So Easy: Luscious Healthy Recipes for Every Meal of the Week, two of which are New York Times best sellers and one for which I was

honored with awards from the James Beard foundation and the International Association of Culinary Professions.

Personally, I have a seven year old daughter, so I have the vantage point of a mom juggling the demands of real life while trying to raise a healthy family. And I also have the perspective of a community leader, as I have spearheaded the formation of a Wellness Committee in my daughter's school, Public School 75 in New York City. The first act of the committee was to sign the school onto the Healthier US Schools challenge, which I learned about during my participation in the healthy kids fair on the White House lawn this past fall.

My experience making changes at this grass roots level at my daughter's school has given me an understanding of the issues we face like none of my formal education could have. Her school is a perfect example of a mixed community urban school. It is Title I school with about 60% of the students qualifying for free-lunch. Its demographics are 49% Hispanic, 30% African American, 13% White and 7% Asian. It is a strong community school that depends on public resources, with a demographic that reflects some of our children most at risk of obesity, diabetes, and food insecurity. The decisions made in this room and in Washington DC directly impact the children there.

On the surface obesity, diabetes, and food insecurity seem like opposite problems -- one of excess and one of scarcity. But in reality they integrally connected. According to the Food Research and Action Center: "Households without money to buy enough food often have to rely on cheaper, high calorie foods to cope with limited money for food and stave off hunger. Families try to maximize caloric intake for each dollar spent, which can lead to over consumption of calories and a less healthful diet."¹ These issues also share a common solution:

¹ See http://www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger&obesity.htm.

the broad and consistent availability of nourishing, high quality, delicious food and the education and inspiration to help children and families make smart choices.

I. Hunger Is On the Rise in America

The statistics on food scarcity are well-known to the Subcommittee, but they remain startling in a country like the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2008 *Household Food Security in the United States* study, 15% of all homes in the U.S. were "food insecure,"² which equates to nearly 17 million households. Of that 15%, 5.7% faced a very low level of food security (amounting to nearly 6.7 million households).³ According to USDA, the remainder of the 17 million households were able to avoid food shortages by eating a less varied diet, using public food assistance programs, or supplementing their household food items with items from food pantries or soup kitchens. Unfortunately, these numbers are starkly higher from 2007, and in fact they are the highest ever recorded by USDA since it began collecting data on food security in 1995.

State-by-state numbers offer little comfort. In California, over the last three years for which the USDA has released its food security data, (2006 to 2008) an average of 12% of households in the State were food insecure and 4.3% had very little food security each year. Over that same period of time, an average of 10.4% of Nebraska households were food insecure each year, with 4.0% facing very low food security. These are not isolated numbers. Over that same time, according to the USDA:

² Food security is defined as "consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members at all times during the year." In real terms, food insecurity can mean running out of food without money to buy more, cutting portion sizes, or skipping meals.

³ In households with very low food security, the food intake of some household members was reduced, and their normal eating patterns were disrupted because of the household's food insecurity.

- In Minnesota, an average of 10.3% of homes were food insecure each year; 4.1% faced very low food security;
- In Oklahoma, an average of 14% of homes were food insecure each year; 5.9% faced very low food security;
- In Texas, an average of 16.3% of homes were food insecure each year; 5.7% faced very low food security;
- In Pennsylvania, an average of 11.2% of homes were food insecure each year; 4.2% faced very low food security;
- In Oregon, an average of 13.1% of homes were food insecure each year; 6.6% faced very low food security; and
- In Ohio, an average of 13.3% of homes were food insecure each year; 5.2% faced very low food security.

In fact, most states had an average of at least 10% of their households face food insecurity each year, with around 3 to 4% of those same homes facing very low food security. And nearly all of the states have seen those numbers grow to some degree since 1995.

These numbers can be expected to grow further as the data in future years measures the full impact of the recession. We all are uncomfortably aware of how many people are out of work and have lost their homes. What is even more striking is the number of underemployed in America, who may face new food security challenges that they have not been used to in the past. I expect that the 2009 USDA numbers will show marked increases in food insecurity throughout

the country, and potentially millions of additional homes may be considered to have very low food security.⁴

What is truly concerning to me, though, is the impact food insecurity has on our nation's children. Generally speaking parents will sacrifice their own food security to make sure that their children have enough to eat. Even so, USDA projected that in 1.3% of U.S. households in 2008 both adults and children suffered from inadequate food due to very low food security, up from 0.8% in 2007. In real numbers, 506,000 households in America could not provide enough food so that everyone living in that home – adult and child alike – could meet their basic nutritional needs. In 2008, nearly **17 million children** lived at risk of facing food security issues at some point during that year, **5.7 million children** were living in homes that faced very low food security for the adults in the home, and **1.1 million children** suffered from the direct effects of very low food security.

Food insecurity issues and hunger have a disproportionate impact on children, with effects well-documented by researchers. According to Share Our Strength, a national organization that, in partnership with Food Network, works hard to make sure no kid in America grows up hungry, childhood hunger impairs kids' health in significant and long-lasting ways.⁵ Studies have shown that children who suffer from hunger are sick more often and are more likely to be hospitalized.⁶ They are more likely to come down with common ailments, like colds, stomachaches, and the flu. Most importantly for the future of the nation, children who suffer

⁴ In fact, the Food Research and Action Center (www.frac.org) just announced that in January of this year, almost 40 million Americans sought SNAP/food stamp assistance, over 450,000 more people than in January 2009. As of the end of January, one in eight Americans received food stamp assistance.

⁵ Much of the following information is explored in more detail on Share Our Strength's website, www.strength.org.

⁶ See, for example, Cook J.T., Frank D.A., Berkowitz C., Black M.M., Casey P.H., Cutts D.B., Meyers A.F., Zaldivar N., Skalicky A., Levenson S.M., Heeren T., Nord M. Food Insecurity is Associated with Adverse Health Outcomes Among Human Infants and Toddlers. *J Nutr*, 134:1432-1438 (June 2004).

from hunger issues are more likely to suffer from childhood and adult obesity, and the harmful chronic consequences caused by obesity.⁷

Hunger also predisposes children to behavioral difficulties, and it impairs their ability to learn and perform academically.⁸ A lack of food can contribute to a child's lack of attention and inability to concentrate in a classroom. Children under the age of 3 who suffer from food security issues often cannot learn as much, as fast, and as well as other children of the same age. Children who do not regularly get enough food can suffer from behavioral and emotional problems, and teens who lack food security are more likely to have issues with their peers and have disciplinary problems at school. As a result, hungry children often achieve less than their peers and may be more likely to face the economic and social difficulties in adulthood that often lead to food insecurity. In many ways, hunger in children now becomes self-reinforcing for future generations.

Numbers are just that – numbers. Often by focusing just on the data, we can lose some perspective about what the numbers mean for the nation. Last year, 49.1 million Americans suffered from a lack of food security. And almost 25% of children went to school hungry in 2008.

⁷ The link between hunger and childhood obesity was examined in Casey, P.H., Szeto, K.L., Robbins, J.M., Stuff, J.E., Connel, C., Gossett, J.M., Simpson, O.M. Child Health-Related Quality of Life and Household Food Security. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.*, 159: 51-56 (2005).

⁸ See, for example, Hunger in Children in the United States: Potential Behavioral and Emotional Correlate, *Pediatrics*. Vol. 101 No. 1 p. e3 (January 1998); Jyoti D.F., Frongillo E.A., Jones S.J. Food Insecurity Affects School Children's Academic Performance, Weight Gain, and Social Skills. *J Nutr*, 135: 2831-2839 (December 2005); Food insufficiency and American school-aged children's cognitive, academic and psycho-social development. *Pediatrics*. Vol. 108, p. 44-53 (2001).

II. Even Where Food Is Sufficient, the Nutritional Value of What Is Eaten Is Questionable

While hunger and food security have to be of primary concern to all of us, even those homes that are secure in their yearly food supply face problems. It is no secret that obesity continues to rise in America. Of immense concern is the rate of obesity among children, which is increasing exponentially. According to information provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,⁹ an estimated 17 percent of children and adolescents between the ages 2 and 19 are obese. Among pre-school age children (those 2 to 5 years old), obesity increased from 5% to 10.4% between 1976-2008 and from 6.5% to 19.6% among 6-11 year olds. Among adolescents aged 12 to 19, obesity increased from 5% to 18.1% during the same period.

Childhood obesity has significant long-term effects for the nation. Again according to data documented by the CDC, obese children and adolescents often remain obese into adulthood – “[O]ne study found that approximately 80% of children who were overweight at aged 10–15 years were obese adults at age 25 years. Another study found that 25% of obese adults were overweight as children. The latter study also found that if overweight begins before 8 years of age, obesity in adulthood is likely to be more severe.”¹⁰

While a number of factors that have contributed to this marked rise in childhood obesity, one significant factor is the change in the American diet. The consumption of processed foods and empty calories has increased, while the consumption of fresh fruit, vegetables, and lean meats has declined. Children now eat significant amounts of junk food as part of their diet, and consumption of high-calorie drinks has grown. Today’s kids consume a diet high in saturated fat

⁹ See <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/index.html>.

¹⁰ *Id.* (internal citations removed).

and sodium, but rarely eat enough fiber or whole grains to support a healthy lifestyle. It is no wonder that nearly 1 in 3 kids are overweight and 1 in 5 are obese.

Even where parents want to provide their family with the most nutritious meals possible, they face real challenges because they live in a food desert. A food desert is an area that lacks ready access to supermarkets or other large grocery stores that stock affordable and nutritious food. The growth of food deserts around the country is astounding. Nationwide, USDA estimates that 23.5 million people, including 6.5 million children, live in low-income areas that are more than a mile from a supermarket. Of the 23.5 million, 11.5 million are low-income individuals in households with incomes at or below 200 percent of the poverty line. Of the 2.3 million people living in low-income rural areas that are more than 10 miles from a supermarket, 1.1 million are low-income. Conversely, in many of these areas, there is ready access to less healthy food alternatives like fast food and convenience stores that stock processed foods high in fat and sugar.

The correlation between a lack of access to nutritious food and less healthy eating should not be ignored when considering how to promote better food choices. Only 2% of children currently eat a healthy diet (moderate in saturated and trans fat, sodium, and calories with recommended amounts of fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy). Better nutrition, in the short term, has been shown to yield better academic performance, especially with regard to breakfast and can effect behavior. In the long term it is a cornerstone of a healthy lifestyle which can reduce the risk of diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes which can ultimately be a great cost to our society.

III. Scripps Networks Interactive and Food Network Are Working to Combat Food Scarcity and to Promote Healthy Eating

There is no single solution to the problems of hunger and nutrition in America. It will take a combination of policy changes, private sector initiatives, and hard work to help Americans have access to adequate amounts of healthy, fresh food each day to support a balanced diet. It has taken decades to change how we eat, and it may take decades more to unlearn many of the bad habits we all have when it comes to food.

Education, though, is one of the fundamental keys to helping American families change their eating habits and approach to food. Through my show *Healthy Appetite* and through the Food Network website and magazine, I inspire people to eat nutritious, fresh foods by providing delicious, accessible recipes as well as tips for navigating restaurants and grocery stores and managing a healthy lifestyle. I strive to follow the USDA guidelines for all of my recipes and teach the perspective of balance and moderation as opposed to dieting and extremes. *Healthy Appetite* is fueled by a passion for delicious healthy food and shows you how to have the foods you love in a healthier way.

My hope is that my show, along with the other shows on the Food Network, can help reverse the seeming loss of cooking skills amongst Americans. As schools turn away from electives like home economics and families spend fewer meals at home eating together, it seems, at least from my perspective, like the nation has lost its cooking heritage. My hope is that my show and others can remind Americans that being in the kitchen is an asset both to themselves and to their families.

I was taught during my master's program in nutrition that the goal of nutrition education is not simply to provide knowledge but rather to affect behavior change. The most effective way to do that is to reach someone in the head, the heart, and the hands. That is, to address

knowledge, motivation, and skills. People need to be educated about good food, good nutrition, and the value of having a diet rich in fresh whole foods. They also need to remember what it is like to love to eat well, be motivated to change their diet, and to be inspired to try new foods. Finally, people have to be taught how to prepare healthy foods in their own kitchens. I strive to incorporate all three of these goals into *Healthy Appetite*.

Food Network, and its parent company Scripps Networks Interactive, also are playing a key role in trying to change the eating habits of Americans. Scripps is the leader in family-friendly lifestyle programming and seeks to promote healthy food choices across its various TV channels and websites. Through its websites and television programming, Scripps serves as a resource for educational materials about healthy eating. At the same time, as people watch my show and others on Food Network, I hope that they are inspired by new and different recipes and are motivated to go into their kitchen and fix a meal. Finally, both Scripps's websites and Food Network shows teach people the skills necessary to prepare food at home – those same skills that seem to have been lost in recent years.

Food Network has several television shows devoted to exploring nutrition in the home and helping families create healthy meals with inexpensive and readily-available foods. Besides *Healthy Appetite*, many episodes of Rachael Ray's *30 Minute Meals* focus on preparing vegetarian dishes and other meals that encourage people to incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables and other nutritious whole foods into their daily meal plans. Likewise, *Boy Meets Grill* with Bobby Flay emphasizes lighter meal preparation by grilling and the use of fresh, local ingredients. In May, Scripps will launch a new network, Cooking Channel, which will include a new show hosted by Emeril Lagasse titled *Fresh Food Fast*.

On the web, where Scripps's food-related websites are the highest rated and most visited on the Internet (with about 13 million unique visitors each month), FoodNetwork.com and its sister website, HealthyEats.com, both provide a vast amount of information to promote better food choices and nutrition education. The Healthy Eating section of FoodNetwork.com features Meal Makeovers, which takes comfort foods and reinvents them with lighter ingredients and substitutions for healthier eating. Healthy & Fast, another section of the FoodNetwork.com website, features advice from dietitian Dana Angelo White and Food Network chefs on ways to prepare fast and fresh weekday meals. On HealthyEats.com, Food Network nutrition specialists provide consumers with the latest tips, nutrition news, low-calorie recipes and easy ideas for adding fresher, more wholesome foods to your life, including information on eating healthy during pregnancy and gluten-free eating.

Food Network also partners with not-for-profit organizations as part of its commitment to promote food access and childhood nutrition. Share Our Strength is Food Network's national public affairs partner, with the two organizations joining together to create the Good Food Gardens initiative. The mission of the Good Food Gardens is to educate families on the importance of fruits, vegetables and other fresh, nutritious foods – key ingredients to ending childhood hunger. Using the Teich Garden Systems, Food Network's Good Food Gardens are educational, outdoor classrooms that offer children fun, hands-on gardening experiences that inspire healthy eating habits for life. Food Network has underwritten the creation of 14 Good Food Gardens across the country, with four more to be opened in 2010. Current Good Food Garden locations are:

- Boys & Girls Clubs of San Francisco, CA;
- Center for Community and Family Services, Altadena, CA;

- Care & Share Food Bank, Colorado Springs, CO;
- Joseph Arthur Middle School, O'Fallon, IL;
- West Side Elementary School, Greer's Ferry, AR;
- Children Aid Society, New York, NY;
- SEED School of Washington, DC;
- Theodore Roosevelt High School, Washington, DC;
- ArtSpace Charter School, Swannonoaa, NC;
- Boys & Girls Club of Palm Beach, West Palm Beach, FL;
- Community School 211 The Bi-Lingual School, New York, NY;
- Fulton Houses, New York, NY;
- Harlem Children's Zone, New York, NY; and
- Naoma Donnelley Haggin Boys & Girls Club, Delray Beach, FL.

Beginning in 2010, Food Network and Share Our Strength will expand our educational partnership, developing initiatives to focus on three critical areas: (1) Operation Frontline; (2) healthy school breakfasts; and (3) education on smart food choices with food stamps. Food Network is particularly happy to be a part of Operation Frontline, a notable success for Share Our Strength. The program provides seven specialized curricula that cover nutrition and healthy eating, food preparation, budgeting and shopping. Operation Frontline's culinary and nutrition volunteers teach these high-quality, cooking-based courses at a variety of community-based agencies—including Head Start centers, housing centers and after-school programs—with neighborhood locations that make it easy for families to attend. Share Our Strength's data on the program reveal the value of nutritional education:

- 87% of Adults report improving their cooking skills after graduating from an Operation Frontline course, which means they're better equipped to make healthy meals for their families at home.
- 96% of kids who take Operation Frontline's Side By Side course enjoyed cooking alongside their parents during class, an important element in continuing to prepare and eat healthy meals together as a family and teaching necessary skills to future generations.
- After participating in Operation Frontline, at least 69% of adults said they were eating more fruit and vegetables than before the course.

IV. Congress Must Be Cognizant of Food Access and Nutrition Issues as It Develops National Food Policies

Congress plays an essential role in promoting access to healthy foods, particularly through federal food assistance programs. Nearly 1 out of every 5 Americans uses one of the USDA's food assistance programs each year. According to USDA's own study of food security, 55% of all food insecure households receive food assistance from either the School Lunch program, SNAP/food stamps, WIC, or some combination of these programs. About 20% of food insecure homes also turned to food pantries to help supplement the food they had at home, and 2.6% ate one or more meals at a soup kitchen sometime during the year.

Federal food assistance programs are also vital to preventing hunger amongst children. Information gathered by Share Our Strength about how children use federal food assistance programs is startling:

- Nearly half of American children will receive food stamp support in their lifetime.
- 17 million children benefit from SNAP assistance on average each month.
- An average of 9.2 million American women and children under the age of 5 received WIC assistance each month last year.

Simply put, if it was not for government support through these programs, we would have even more hungry kids in this nation.

The most important food support programs for children in this country are the National School Lunch and National School Breakfast programs. Again, according to data relayed by Share Our Strength, 19.5 million American children ate free or reduced-price lunches each school day last year. As with the indices of hunger discussed above, that number has been increasing; last year, 859,000 more children utilized the free or reduced-price school lunch program per day compared to 2008. 8.8 million children on average used the free or reduced-price school breakfast program each school day in 2009, but 10.1 million children across the nation who were eligible for free or reduced-price school breakfasts did not receive them last year, even though they received free or reduced-price school lunches.

I am glad to see that Congress and the Obama Administration are taking proactive steps to make the school lunch program, and all of the federal food support programs, healthier and more robust. The steps taken by this Committee to reform the SNAP/food stamp program through the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (part of the 2008 Farm Bill) were quite welcome. Unfortunately, low-income families often try to stretch their food budget by purchasing cheaper, more caloric foods that while filling, contribute to obesity and other problems that can be alleviated with a healthier diet.¹¹ By raising the SNAP/food stamp monthly benefit allotment and promoting the purchase of fresh fruits, vegetables, and healthier food alternatives, this Committee and the Congress have taken a good first step toward encouraging families to eat healthier meals and educate children about healthy eating. Additionally, the \$1 billion in the bill

¹¹ The Food Research and Action Center has documented the relationship between hunger and obesity. See http://www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger&obesity.htm.

to provide support for the purchase of fruits and vegetables by schools will help to deliver fresh foods to students.

As the mom of a school-aged child, I am particularly happy that First Lady Michelle Obama has focused her attention on the epidemic of childhood obesity. I think her work to get the private sector to agree to set standards for what is sold to students at school is welcome, as well as her encouragement to those same companies to produce healthier foods and reveal more nutritional information to consumers. I am also very interested in the upcoming renewal of the Childhood Nutrition Act this year and applaud the Senate Agriculture Committee's action on the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 last month. I think that bill contains some very good ideas about how we should approach healthy eating in schools:

- The bill would set national nutrition standards for all foods sold by schools, not just meals. It also creates an incentive for schools to comply with heightened nutritional standards for their meals.
- The bill would provide additional training to school food service personnel on healthy eating.
- The bill would provide federal support for the creation of school gardens to educate kids about fresh fruits and vegetables.
- The bill would also provide funding to schools to help them purchase fresh, locally-sourced produce to be used in school breakfasts and lunches.

I strongly support the move by the bill to set nutritional standards for all foods sold in schools, particularly for snack foods. Snacks now account for 27% of children's daily caloric intake and much of that is of low nutritional value. We should strive to create a total environment of healthy living in the schools, both curricular and extracurricular, by providing standards for

vending machines, a la carte foods, snacks, and after-school offerings. I also really appreciate the Senate's work on the summer lunch program. It is important to provide healthy food assistance to school children throughout the year, and school summer lunch programs are often very under-utilized opportunities for kids to get healthy meals. I hope the Congress moves forward with this legislation this year.

I think that the Healthy School Meals Act of 2010, introduced by Representative Polis a few weeks ago, offers a few good ideas on childhood nutrition and food availability. Healthy eating should start young, and I think giving schools additional support to help them provide vegetarian meal options will expose kids to new, healthier foods. I also would encourage Congress and the Committee to look at several other issues related to food and nutrition when considering reforms to its food assistance programs:

- Congress should require or provide incentives for the employment of or consultation with qualified nutrition professionals to aide in implementing school food service and wellness policies. Congress also should consider providing incentives to schools and school districts to implement, assess, and enhance these wellness policies.
- Congress should help fund, or encourage states to fund, infrastructure improvements that will enable schools to prepare and store healthier foods and provide adequate movement space for children to be active.
- Congress should support and enhance nutrition and physical education programs especially those that are experiential, inspirational and skill building, such as cooking workshops, food growing, farm visits, and similar events.

- Congress should encourage federal food assistance programs, along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to emphasize the nutritional value of including whole foods in your diet rather than processed foods. Often we take a numerical approach to determining what is healthy by only looking at things like fat, sugar, and calories. Unfortunately, that numerical approach encourages people to continue to eat processed foods that, while meeting the numerical definition of what might be considered healthy, are far less nutritious than comparable whole foods. Educating people to take a macro approach to nutrition, rather than a numerical approach, would be a tremendous step toward encouraging much better food decisions.

I truly appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of Scripps Networks and the Food Network. Together, we can make this country a healthier place to live. I look forward to your questions.