



Packed
Promise

Statement Presented
Before the
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
The Honorable Michael Conaway, Chairman

By
Melinda R. Newport, MS, RD/LD
Director, WIC and Child Nutrition Programs, Nutrition Services
The Chickasaw Nation

Past, Present, and Future of SNAP: Opportunities for Improving Access to Food

Wednesday, November 16, 2016



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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to present testimony today. I would particularly like to acknowledge Mr. Frank Lucas, our Representative from Oklahoma, and thank you for your many years of service to our citizens.

My name is Melinda Newport, MS, RD/LD, Director, WIC and Child Nutrition Programs, Nutrition Services, for the Chickasaw Nation. I bring you greetings from Bill Anoatubby, Governor of the Chickasaw Nation. The Chickasaw Nation administers several United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food & Nutrition Services (FNS) programs, as well as, a variety of nutrition-related demonstration and research projects. As a registered dietitian having worked at the national level on many challenging nutrition program issues for more than 30 years, I am pleased and honored to testify today.

Chairman Conaway, we appreciate the Committee's commitment to ensuring the viability, strength and quality of federal nutrition programs and, in particular, a focus on innovations that might enhance the effectiveness of our country's largest nutrition safety net program. Increasing access to and availability of nutritious foods for families in rural areas is a challenge. On behalf of the Chickasaw Nation, thank you for this opportunity to share regarding innovations in our Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act Demonstration to End Childhood Hunger, also known as Packed Promise.

The Chickasaw Nation has more than 63,000 citizens and our jurisdictional boundaries encompass all or part of 13 counties in south-central Oklahoma.

Common Access Barriers to Nutritious Foods

In spite of the Chickasaw Nation's administering a dozen or so federal, state and tribally funded nutrition programs, we still find there are gaps in rural areas, evidenced by the fact that 15.5% of households remain food insecure. Children's development, health, and well-being depend on access to a safe and secure source of food. In Oklahoma, 25.6% of children are food insecure, meaning they either go hungry or do not receive the minimal nutritional amounts set forth by the USDA. Due to the rural nature of the Chickasaw Nation, many participants live in food deserts, the closest grocery store is often 10 miles or further from their home. The Chickasaw Nation has observed that transportation is often an issue among the most food insecure clients and limited access to grocery stores with quality food choices in rural areas is common. To help eliminate

these barriers, as well as the stigma often associated with food assistance programs, the idea for a direct mail food benefit via an online grocery shopping experience was conceived.

Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act to End Childhood Hunger Demonstration Projects

In 2014, USDA administered a competitive grant process with the purpose to test innovative strategies to end childhood hunger. This included alternative models for service delivery and benefit levels that promote the reduction or elimination of childhood hunger and food insecurity. USDA placed special emphasis in targeting areas or populations where there are currently elevated levels of food insecurity or gaps in nutrition assistance program coverage.

The Chickasaw Nation's Packed Promise project was one of five projects awarded nationally through USDA's Demonstration Projects to End Childhood Hunger grant. Packed Promise is designed to test the viability of an online ordering system and home delivery of food benefits to households with school-age children who qualify for free school meals.

Packed Promise Project Design

A unique feature of the Packed Promise project, is the partnership between the Chickasaw Nation and *Feed The Children*, a 501(c)(3), non-profit food assistance organization with expertise and vast experience in global food operations such as: bulk food ordering, packaging, and delivery. Feed The Children provides logistics experts, a broad network of volunteers, and the food buying power to allow an increased number of children to be served for fewer food dollars. Working together in a mutually supportive partnership, the national public nutrition assistance and private food assistance systems can prevent and eradicate the unnecessary health problem of childhood hunger. Furthermore, the convenient geographic location of one of their distribution centers created an appealing efficiency. We also leveraged the existing website developed by Feed The Children for online food ordering for individuals and households and customized the content with Packed Promise branding.

As the only viable access point to reaching children across rural Oklahoma, the Chickasaw Nation collaborates with school districts to identify students who have elevated levels of food insecurity. In order to be included in the demonstration area, school districts had to meet the following inclusion criteria – 1) a county with a diabetes prevalence rate of 15% or higher, 2) a county with 15% of households with children less than 18 years old who fall below the poverty line for income, 3) a county with a general population greater than 9% Native American, 4) exceed 50% free school meal eligible student population, 4) exceed the state wide average of 16.6% Native American student population, 5) located within the Chickasaw Nation jurisdictional boundaries.

The home delivery portion of the project design creates an experience similar to online grocery shopping. Families choose from five food packages comprised of nutrient dense, shelf stable food items from a food ordering website. Each month participants order their food boxes via the website or by calling the Packed Promise team. Each eligible child receives one 25-pound box of shelf stable foods plus a \$15 FRESH check to purchase fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables at Chickasaw Nation WIC authorized retailers or Farmers' Markets. Nutrition education, recipes, vendor information, and other project tips are also available on the food ordering website.

The Packed Promise demonstration project provides an approximate retail value of \$60 to \$80 of food per month dependent upon the food package selected. Feed The Children, through their food buying expertise, volume purchasing, and use of donor relationships, is able to provide the food benefit for an average cost of \$20.08 per food box. This benefit level provides adequate food for an evening meal plus one snack per day, intended to supplement the National School Lunch Program. Feed The Children competitively bid and awarded a contract to UPS to provide the delivery service.

The Chickasaw Nation believes this innovative project will help alleviate food insecurity and improve diet quality, while proving to be a cost affordable food delivery model.

Nutritional Content of Food Package

The updated Nutrition Standards for School Meals were reviewed alongside the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate recommendations for the project's targeted student population. From this review, the need for increases in the protein, whole grain and vegetable food groups were identified to effectively fill the biggest nutrient voids experienced by school-age food insecure students. Dairy and fruits are offered at every school meal, so the focus was smaller on these food groups. A committee of Chickasaw Nation registered dietitians was also mindful of fat and sodium content, and chose to primarily offer low-fat, minimally processed packaged choices with low to moderate sodium content.

The overall goal for the food package is to provide a well-balanced, nutrient dense food benefit that offers commonly accepted foods, while providing exposure to a few unfamiliar wholesome food options. Foods requiring minimal cooking or preparation were included to accommodate the potential that youth may prepare meals on their own.

The Chickasaw Nation is aware that SNAP benefits are provided on a rolling month cycle. As SNAP benefit cycles end and food dollars run out, participants commonly report lack of food adequacy. As part of this implementation, participants answered questions regarding the week of the month in which they experience highest feelings of food insecurity, and, based on that, selected the week of the month in which they desire to receive their monthly direct mail benefit. The goal is that the direct mail food benefit will alleviate this episodic food insecurity by delivering a benefit during this critical time frame.

Packed Promise Implementation Facts

The Chickasaw Nation implemented the Packed Promise demonstration project in February 2015 and has provided benefits to families for the past 9 months. On average, 1,500 households comprised of 3,500 children receive benefits each month. To date, Packed Promise has shipped 793,000 pounds of food to vulnerable Oklahoma families. These families have redeemed \$261,000 in fresh fruits and vegetables by using their FRESH checks delivered along with their food boxes.

Approximately 65% of participants place their orders online, while the remaining 35% call Packed Promise specialists who place the participants' orders on their behalf.

It was initially perceived that this most vulnerable population move or change their place of residence often. Over the course of the past 8 months, less than a fourth, 22.59%, of the Packed Promise participants have indicated a change of address.

Evaluation

USDA commissioned a rigorous independent evaluation of each demonstration project. The evaluation is being performed by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. The primary evaluation outcomes of interest are the change in the prevalence of food insecurity among children, improvement in diet quality, and evaluation of costs associated with the project.

Documented Success stories

- Grandmother and FRESH check experience – A grandmother shops with her grandchildren to let them choose fruits and vegetables. One child chose a pineapple. The grandmother was unfamiliar with how to cut a fresh pineapple, so looked up a “how to” video on YouTube. Her grandchildren loved it, and she said it was their first time to try fresh pineapple!
- Grateful father – A father called to express appreciation for the program and said it not only helps financially, but it has also changed some of his family’s eating habits, such as eating more beans, tomatoes and other vegetables they do not normally choose to buy. He said it has provided healthier options for his family.
- Hummus – tried it, loved it! – A mother called and said that her son had never tried hummus, but “gave it a shot” since it was in the box. Now he takes it every day in his lunch for school and buys celery with the FRESH check to dip in his hummus!
- Help at just the right time! Staff were able to connect with a participant that had never placed an order before and was on unpaid leave from work after having surgery. She said God had answered her prayers when her phone rang and our staff was on the line explaining the program and taking her order for food!
- Christmas every month! - One mom called to place her monthly order and expressed extreme gratitude for Packed Promise. She stated that her family received the boxes every month, but to this day her girls still act like it's Christmas when the boxes arrive on the doorstep. They run to carry them inside and squeal with excitement when opening the boxes!

Future Considerations

As the Packed Promise demonstration is nearing the mid-point of its 2-year implementation period, some adjustments are being considered. Since participants are limited to 5 food packages, modifications to the content of each package are being evaluated to increase variety and exposure to new foods, while alleviating repetitiveness. A goal of maintaining the overall nutritional composition will remain a priority.

In our initial concept design, individual food item ordering was preferred versus ordering from a limited number of food packages. However, individual food item ordering presented multiple cost constraints such as maintaining adequate inventory of items, limiting bulk purchasing of

items, and the take rate of specific short dated food items presents potential waste. In the non-profit food assistance model, the ability to bulk order the contents of the food packages offers a significant cost savings and grouping items into food packages increases the inventory control. The Chickasaw Nation would be open to exploring an individual food item ordering model in a retail environment that would still gain access to volume purchasing, but would be able to offset some of the disadvantages through distribution of items to other store patrons if not ordered by program participants.

The WIC Program EBT model allows the ability to prescribe specific nutrient dense food items and quantities for purchase at the participant's convenience. In the future, our preference would be to transition the \$15 FRESH check benefit to an EBT card. With a check benefit, the entire amount of the check must be used all at once. Transitioning the fresh component to an EBT card would allow the participant to purchase produce as needed, would reduce stigma during shopping in the check-out lane, and the benefits for multiple children in a household could be aggregated on a single card.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears online ordering of foods and direct shipment to the home is a viable model for addressing food insecurity for rural families, while ensuring access to more nutritious food choices. Food assistance programs continue to be a key factor in building healthy and economically strong communities. Investment by federal nutrition programs in targeted foods of high nutritional quality, and educational support to assist families in using those optimally, is critical to reducing food insecurity, as well as, avoiding obesity, diabetes and other costly chronic diseases that compromise quality of life.


Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for this opportunity to share our experience. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Online grocery shopping experience

4,523 vulnerable Oklahoma children
eligible each month

*Hope delivered right
to your doorstep*

Our food kits help support
your child's nutrition needs.

SHOP FOOD KITS 



**Packed
Promise**

**25 pounds of food plus a
\$15 check for fruits and
vegetables per child**

**Over 793,000 pounds of food
shipped to date!**

Packed Promise



Change begins with one choice.

These prepackaged, nutrient-dense meals are more than food for a month. They are the promise of **hope** for a better **tomorrow** and the **courage** to **believe** you can realize every **dream**.

PROMISE FOR *Hope*



PROTEIN

Canned beans 2 cans, 14-16 oz. pinto & black	Canned beans 2 cans, 14-16 oz. black-eyed pea & kidney	Chunk chicken in water 2 cans, 5 oz.	Tuna 2 cans
		Dried pinto beans 1 bag, 16 oz.	Hummus 10 oz.

DAIRY

UHT 1% milk 64 oz.	Pudding (1) 4 pack
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GRAIN

Whole grain elbow macaroni 12-16 oz.	Oatmeal 15 oz.	Graham crackers 15 oz.	Low-fat popcorn 9 oz.
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FRUITS

Mandarin oranges 2 cans, 11 oz.	Unsweetened applesauce (2) 15 oz.
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VEGETABLES

Cut green beans 1 can, 15-16 oz.	Spinach 14 oz.	Canned tomatoes 2 cans, 14.5 oz.	Canned pumpkin 15 oz.
Diced carrots 1 can, 15-16 oz.	Tomato sauce 2 cans, 15 oz. Marinara 15 oz.	Diced tomatoes w/ green chilies 2 cans, 10 oz.	Canned sweet potatoes 15 oz.

PROMISE TO *Believe*



PROTEIN

Canned beans 2 cans, 14-16 oz. black-eyed pea & kidney	Chunk chicken in water 2 cans, 5 oz.	Peanut butter 18 oz.	Hummus 10 oz.
		Dried pinto beans 1 bag, 16 oz.	Light tuna in water 2 cans, 5 oz.

DAIRY

UHT 1% milk 64 oz.	Chocolate UHT 1% milk 64 oz.
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GRAIN

Whole grain penne 12-16 oz.	Brown rice 16 oz. bag	Triscuits 9 oz.	Cereal 18 oz.
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FRUITS

Pears 2 cans, 15-16 oz.	Pineapple (2) 15 oz.
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VEGETABLES

Sweet peas 1 can, 15-16 oz.	Mixed vegetables 15 oz.	Canned tomatoes 2 cans, 14.5 oz.	Canned pumpkin 15 oz.
Diced carrots 1 can, 15-16 oz.	Tomato sauce 2 cans, 15 oz. Marinara 15 oz.	Diced tomatoes w/ green chilies 2 cans, 10 oz.	Canned sweet potatoes 15 oz.