

## 2009 Child Nutrition Reauthorization Child and Adult Care Food Program Preschool Recommendations

CACFP is profoundly important to America's children—both in terms of the number of children it serves and in terms of its positive impact on children and their development. The healthy food that it makes available is essential to meeting the needs of hungry, low-income children for good nutrition. In addition, through in-home visits, group classes, and ongoing assistance and support, CACFP-sponsoring organizations and state agencies teach child care providers not just the importance of good nutrition but also offer practical advice and guidance on serving healthy and nutritious food.

Unfortunately, there are still millions of children in child care settings who could benefit from CACFP but are currently unserved. Over the last eleven years, there has been a 27 percent drop in the number of CACFP-sponsoring organizations and in the number of family child care homes participating in CACFP. There are also providers currently participating who could better serve children with additional support. A well-conceived reauthorization bill can help to reduce hunger, reduce the number of children who are overweight or obese, improve child nutrition and health, and enhance child development and school readiness.

The following recommendations would help to improve program access and nutritional quality for children in child care, Head Start, and Early Head Start programs.

- **Streamline Access for Children in Family Child Care Settings**
- **Enhance Meal Reimbursements**
- **Streamline Program and Paperwork Requirements**

### Cost Recommendations

#### *Streamline Access for Children in Family Child Care Settings:*

- **Reduce the threshold for the percentage of children in an area who must be in low-income families for a family child care provider to be eligible for higher reimbursements for all of the children in his or her program (area eligibility) from 50 percent to 40 percent.** This would enable many more homes to participate in CACFP through the relatively easy route of area eligibility and many more children desperately in need of nutritional meals and snacks to be served by CACFP. Tests in other similar programs have been or actually are higher currently. Prior to 1981, the threshold for an area participating in the Summer Food Program was 33 percent. To be eligible as a school-wide program under Title I, at least 40 percent of a school's student body must be low-income. The current CACFP requirement for family child care of 50 percent disqualifies many communities with significant numbers of struggling families. This is especially true in rural and suburban areas, which do not typically have the same concentration of poverty seen in urban areas.

Family child care homes' participation in CACFP, which had been one of the fastest growing child nutrition programs, has dropped significantly since the introduction of a

complex two-tiered reimbursement system in 1997. For most providers qualifying for only the lower tier reimbursements, the cost of the gap between the reimbursement level and the actual cost of meeting the CACFP meal pattern and significant paperwork discourages them from participating in the program. In many cases, providers do not have the resources to make up the shortfall because child care is a relatively low-income profession. It is easier just to resort to serving cheaper, less nutritious meals and operate without the CACFP standards, oversight, and required paperwork. It is not uncommon for providers to forgo offering even the less costly meals and simply let children rely on food sent from home. Without access to the benefits of CACFP, there is great concern about the nutritional value of the meals and snacks that family child care providers can offer to the young children in their care, especially in the current economy. Research has demonstrated CACFP's clear role in helping to assure good nutrition and high-quality, affordable child care.

### *Enhance Meal Reimbursements:*

- **Increase CACFP reimbursements to reflect the increased costs of meeting the Dietary Guidelines.** Purchasing, preparing, and serving more nourishing meals and snacks is more expensive. Increasing the availability and consumption of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lower-fat dairy products for young children in child care is absolutely essential and needs to be supported by adequate meal reimbursements. Rising food and fuel costs have made serving healthy meals and snacks an even more expensive proposition. Yet, reimbursement levels are too low to begin with, even when indexed for inflation, which deters participation or nutrition quality improvements. The rising costs generate additional pressure in an already delicate balance between the value of CACFP to child care centers, Head Start programs, and family child providers and the real costs to participate.
- **Allow CACFP to offer the option of a third meal (typically this would be supper) for children in child care, as the program used to do.** As parents work longer hours to make ends meet, many more young children are spending most of their waking hours in child care on work days. Recommendations developed by early childhood experts, based on the best nutrition and child development science, specify that young children need to eat small, healthy meals and snacks on a regular basis throughout the day. We should restore CACFP support to the full complement of meals young children need and stop short-changing young children at a time when they can least afford it.

### Non-Cost Recommendations

#### *Streamline Program and Paperwork Requirements:*

- **Allow CACFP-sponsoring organizations to plan multi-year administrative budgets, the ability to use carryover funds, and the option to keep their earned administrative reimbursement using a “homes multiplied by rates” system similar to the simplified system recently enacted in the Summer Food Service Program.** Taking a lesson from the success of these administrative mechanisms in the Women,

Infants, and Children (WIC) and Summer Food Service programs, sponsoring organizations should be given the flexibility needed to use their earned reimbursement to provide the best services to child care providers in CACFP. This would allow sponsors to make adjustments to budgets to account for the level of provider participation, which is often difficult to predict. In addition, sponsoring organizations, which now have to bring their budgets to a full and complete stop at the end of the fiscal year, are sometimes forced to cut back on necessary spending towards the end of the year to ensure their costs do not exceed earned reimbursement.

- **Direct the Secretary to eliminate the ineffective and poorly targeted “block claim” requirement, which deems as suspect any provider serving one or more meals to the same number of children for 15 days.** There are numerous other, better ways to monitor program usage. This poorly targeted requirement has accomplished little while resulting in hours of wasted time spent filling out meaningless paperwork, increased costs for on-site monitoring visits, and unnecessary alarm among child care providers and parents. Moreover, this requirement pulls valuable resources away from legitimate control functions and programmatic objectives.
- **Restore the right to advance funds for sponsors and child care centers to cover program costs upfront.** Some child care centers find it too expensive to pay all the CACFP food costs up front for several months before the first CACFP payment arrives. Advance funds, when a state chooses to offer them, can help to bridge that initial gap and ease the way for centers serving many low-income children to participate in CACFP. Some CACFP sponsors face similar problems and rely on advance funds. Sponsors regularly wait for up to two months before their claims for reimbursement are paid by the state. In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act reversed a long-standing provision of the law and allowed states the option to eliminate advance funds. The right to advances should be restored to address access problems generated in areas where the funds have been removed.
- **Allow family child care providers to facilitate the return of participating children's family income form for the CACFP.** Currently, due to concerns about parent privacy, providers are prohibited from collecting the income forms from parents or helping in any way with their application process. Instead, parents must send the forms to a sponsoring organization. Many parents have expressed a desire to simply hand their forms to their provider. This option could make participation in the program much easier. If the parent forgot to sign the form or failed to include other important information, the provider will be able to tell the parent and explain how to remedy it. For those parents that prefer to send their income forms into the sponsor, they would still have that option.
- **Continue USDA Paperwork Reduction Initiative.** We recommend continuing the successful USDA Paperwork Reduction Initiative.

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