

Chairman Lincoln's Opening Statement at Hearing on Child Nutrition Reauthorization

November 17, 2009

As prepared for delivery.

"Good morning and welcome to the Senate Agriculture Committee, where today we will continue a series of hearings begun by my predecessor, Senator Tom Harkin, in anticipation of the reauthorization of federal child nutrition programs. We are honored today to be joined by two distinguished panels of witnesses, including Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and a panel of experts from Arkansas.

"We undertake this task at a difficult time. Just one week before Thanksgiving, we are reminded of the tremendous need across our country. Just yesterday, the Department of Agriculture released its annual report on hunger and food insecurity. The technical terms that USDA uses in this report are "low food security" or "very low food security." But let's be honest about what this really means, these are families that are either hungry or a meal or two away from being hungry.

"This report highlights the seriousness of the child nutrition bill that lies before us. According to the USDA, in 2008, 16.4 percent of all individuals, just over 49 million people, experienced hunger or were at risk of hunger at some point in time during the prior year. This is an increase of nearly 13 million people over the year. Never before in the history of this survey has this country experienced increases of this magnitude.

"For our most vulnerable citizens, our children, the story is even worse. 22.5 percent of families with children were at risk of hunger in 2008, up from 16.9 percent in 2007. Rates were also markedly higher than the national average for single parent, black and Hispanic households.

"I am also sad to report that my home state of Arkansas now has the third highest rate of hunger in the country — 15.9 percent are at risk.

"These grim statistics add a note of seriousness to these hearings, but they also lend a sense of purpose. The task before us is not just a rote exercise. We do not undertake this simply because the reauthorization expires, but because people across this country are sorely in need. We go forward on this reauthorization because people across this country are suffering and because we have a responsibility to act.

"I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how this Committee can carry out its responsibility in this regard, especially in light of the new USDA report. But before we do, I would like to outline three priority areas that I think can serve as guiding principles for the reauthorization before us.

"First — we must take steps to ensure that all children eligible for federal child nutrition programs are actually receiving them. Despite the fact that programs such as the School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs have been around for decades, there remain many children who could be participating but do not.

"Second — we must improve the nutritional quality of the meal benefits provided through child nutrition programs. Ensuring that children have enough to eat should be a hallmark of a fundamentally decent society. But with obesity, diabetes, and nutrition-related chronic diseases epidemic among us, we must not stop at just filling their bellies, we must also take steps to provide foods that nourish and promote the development of our children.

“Third – we must modernize and improve the integrity of child nutrition programs. We have a WIC Program that, for the most part, still relies on paper coupons even as most of our federal programs, like the SNAP Program, have entered the electronic age by transitioning to electronic benefits. In the School Lunch Program, elementary school children carry paper applications in their backpacks and then we wonder why some applications never make it back to the school, preventing children from receiving school lunch benefits. Surely we can do more to bring these programs into the 21st century, with benefits for both children and for program operators alike.

“With these principles in mind, I look forward to the testimony of our very qualified witnesses today and I yield to my friend, Ranking Member Chambliss for an opening statement.”

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