

TESTIMONY TO USDA
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Good Morning. My name is Paula James, Director of Child Health and Nutrition for Contra Costa Child Care Council, Chair of the CA Child Care Food Program Roundtable and Board member of the National CACFP Forum.

My comments today will reflect my recent testimony to the House Ed and Labor Committee about the rapidly rising cost of food and its impact on the Child and Adult Care Food Program, young children and families it serves.

Rising food costs have more than ever increased the need for the Child and Adult Care Food Program and at the same time have decreased access to the program and threatened to reduce the quality of the meals served to young children. At a time when the prevention of childhood obesity is a paramount concern nationally, we can afford neither.

As families struggle to make ends meet, CACFP becomes all the more important to help fill the ever widening gap between what foods families can afford to buy and what we know young children need to grow strong and healthy. More and more cash-strapped working families depend on the child care setting to fill some of that gap through meals served while their child is in care.

As a family child care provider in LA stated: *On Mondays the kids are famished. They eat like they are starving. I don't know what they are eating over the weekends, but I have to plan big meals on Mondays.*

CACFP's good nutrition is important not just because it provides enough food, but because it provides the "right food", the "healthy" food. In a recent USA Today Gallup poll, 46% of those surveyed said the higher cost of food is creating a financial hardship, primarily noticing an increase in the cost of milk, fruits, vegetables, meat, bread, and eggs. These are the same foods that comprise the meal pattern for the CACFP.

A center director from San Diego stated: *...I will need to downgrade my great center menus because we can't afford all of the variety, especially of fresh fruits and vegetables.*

A Head Start program serving over 800 low income children in San Mateo CA had this to say: *Last year our foods costs increased 15%. Are we still able to feed children nutritious meals? Yes, but it comes with the price of reducing the quality of our education services.*

At the same time need is increasing, access to CACFP is declining and nutrition quality is jeopardized. For some child care providers and centers the balance has shifted, the cost of the gap between reimbursement level and cost of meeting the meal pattern and the required paperwork is finally pushing them off the program.

Participation in the FCC portion of the program declined precipitously after Tiering as part of Welfare Reform. We are now seeing another significant decline and for the first time the center participation has decreased. Only about 41% of children in licensed FCC are in a home providing CACFP meals and snacks

A recent California study compared meals served by homes that participated in CACFP to meals brought from home and found that meals from home were of a significantly lower quality.

A FCC provider from LA who participates in the CACFP had this to say: *I shop at discount stores and try to stretch the money. I try to buy fresh fruits and vegetable but the cost is going up. Everything we use, apples, broccoli, even the canned stuff is going up. Milk has doubled. We really need the food program. So many kids will suffer if we don't have it. And then learning will suffer. Yet I talk to providers everyday who are leaving the program because they can't afford to buy the foods the program requires.*

A sponsoring organization in Alameda, CA noted that: *providers are cutting back on seconds, serving more crackers instead of veggies at snack and less milk because it's so expensive. The quality of food choices has changed.*

Rising food and fuel costs have also threatened access by exacerbating long standing pressures on the already fragile CACFP support system, the community based organizations that sponsor CACFP participation of FCC. California has seen half of the program sponsors drop out in last 12 years. Nationally 27% have dropped.

So, what are some of the solutions for protecting access and quality of meals for young children in this time of increasing need? . The 2009 Child Nutrition Program Reauthorization provides an opportunity to protect access and meal quality for kids in this time of increasing need. I have outlined many recommendations in my written testimony and I would like to highlight a few today. The first is to increase the meal reimbursement to reflect the increased cost of meeting the program requirements and, hopefully, the Dietary Guidelines. The second would be to increase sponsor organizations administrative reimbursement to reflect the real costs of tiering, integrity rules and additional time requirements for low literacy and rural providers. The third is to eliminate or at least simplify some of the ineffective time consuming integrity rules (block claiming/5 day reconciliation).

As a child care center director in Concord, California said, *we worked really hard to make really good changes to our menus to provide nutritious meals for our kids, we can't go back on them and we won't, even if it means the money we had for instructional materials has to be spent on food.* She shouldn't have to make that choice.

Reauthorization is an opportunity for the USDA, Congress, State agencies and Sponsor organizations to work together to do the right thing and put this program back on track running full and fuel efficient.