

Testimony for the House Education and the Workforce Committee's
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
Examining the Summer Food Service Program

Adele LaTourette

July 17, 2018

Good morning Subcommittee Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing Examining the Summer Food Service Program, a program that is critical to the health and well-being of millions of children across the country.

My name is Adele LaTourette. I am the Director of the New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition. By way of some brief background, the New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition is a program of the Center for Food Action in New Jersey, Inc, which is based in Bergen County, NJ. The Center also runs a local program that serves emergency food through seven sites strategically located throughout the county. I say that to let you know that when I started working at the Center, almost 40 years ago, I was on the front lines of hunger. I saw that emergency food, while serving a critical role in helping people who are experiencing hunger, was then, and remains, incapable of solving the problem of hunger in our country. For that, people must rely on the federal government, through school meal programs, SNAP, and, of course, summer food. These programs remain the true front line against hunger in our nation.

So let's talk about the Summer Food Service Program. During the school year, hundreds of thousands of New Jersey children receive much of their daily nutrition by eating breakfast and lunch at school. Those meals stop when the school doors close for the summer, leaving many children without enough food to eat during the summer months. We see food insecurity go up during the summer months, and we know from research that kids gain more weight during the summer. Federal summer meals programs are designed to fill that nutrition gap, ensuring that kids receive healthy meals that keep hunger at bay.

Over the past several years, the New Jersey Food for Thought Campaign, in partnership with the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, has worked to expand availability of these meals – which go a long way toward addressing childhood hunger. And we have had a lot of success. New Jersey jumped from 12th to 6th place nationally for serving meals to children during the summer, according to the Food Research & Action Center's annual *Hunger Doesn't Take A Summer Vacation* report.

This summer, New Jersey communities are expected to host nearly 1,400 meal sites, an important increase from last summer. Without sites throughout low-income communities, kids do not have access to summer meals. And without sponsors, like school districts, local governments, and community organizations, operating the program and providing meals at sites, kids do not have access to meals.

In addition to providing free, healthy meals, many sites also offer an opportunity for children to play together, engage in enrichment activities, hone their academic skills and be better prepared when they return to school in September. This can help reduce the summer learning slide-- the loss of academic skills and knowledge over the summer--which hits low-income children harder than their higher income peers. During the course of a child's academic career, the summer learning slide can have a cumulative impact on his or her educational outcomes. Our summer meal sites combined with programming also often provide crucial child care for working parents.

Who's doing this work in New Jersey? The New Jersey Food for Thought Campaign, launched in 2011, is a coalition of education, health and anti-hunger organizations, child advocates, local, state and federal agencies and national organizations working to end childhood hunger in New Jersey. Our diverse coalition is fueled by our members' shared knowledge that the healthy meals available through the federal child nutrition programs—summer food, school meals, and afterschool meals—are critical to children's academic achievement and health.

The initial focus of the campaign was to improve access to the School Breakfast Program in New Jersey. In that effort, we had remarkable success. Participation in school breakfast is up 73 percent since 2010. We have doubled the amount of federal reimbursement dollars coming into the state for school breakfast to \$105 million this fiscal year and increased the number of children being served by almost 100,000 free and reduced-price certified students. Recognizing the fact that at the end of the academic year, the issue of hunger doesn't disappear, but is, in fact, exacerbated by the lack of school meals, we then turned our sights to summer food.

According to data provided by the USDA and the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, New Jersey communities fed about 94,800 children on an average day in July 2017 through two federal summer meals programs — the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

That represents a 27 percent increase since 2015, translating into nearly 20,000 more children receiving food on a typical day in July 2017. This pushed New Jersey's participation rate to 24 students for every 100 low-income students who received free or reduced-price school lunch during the 2016-2017 school year, up from 19 per 100 in 2015.

Nearly 3.2 million summer meals were served by 116 sponsors at 1,372 sites across New Jersey. These sites included schools, parks, playgrounds, libraries, community pools, housing authorities and other places where children congregate in the summer. The number of meal sites grew 23 percent from 2015 to 2017. At the same time, the number of meals served increased 16 percent, according to state Department of Agriculture data.

Along with the rise in participation came a jump in federal dollars flowing into New Jersey communities to feed children during the summer months. Federal reimbursements for the Summer Food Service Program increased by 49 percent to \$11 million in 2017, compared to about \$7.4 million in 2015 according to USDA, which administers the program on a federal level.

This process was fueled by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture's and the New Jersey Food for Thought Campaign's work to recruit more summer meal sponsors and sites to spread the word about summer meals – and to communities that responded to this need to feed more children during the summer months.

We are making great progress, but we still have not met the national benchmark set by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) to serve 40 children for every 100 low-income children who participate in school lunch. If New Jersey had achieved that goal in July 2017, the state would have collected an additional estimated \$5.2 million to feed hungry children during the summer.

The Fuel for Thought Campaign has taken a number of key steps to increase summer food participation. First, outreach is KEY! It is more common than not that parents simply don't know the program exists. Our efforts include: fliers at schools (NJ legislation mandates that schools notify parents of the program); kick off events; media blitz – social and traditional media; and members of the statewide campaign reaching out to their local counterparts and networks

We have had numerous successes in our efforts to increase participation in summer meals. But I want to highlight one particular success story that includes public and private partnerships. In Bridgeton, Mayor Albert Kelly has embraced summer food. The city used a \$10,000 grant from Ocean First, a local foundation, to retrofit an old Head Start bus to become a bright, inviting mobile meals bus. The Healthy Food Express serves up both tasty food and engaging books to area children. It overcomes the transportation barriers that some children face in accessing summer meals. It was launched last summer. The outside of the bus was brightly painted with pictures of children and slogans like, "Eat Healthy Every Day."

Last summer, the bus not only helped feed area children who could not travel to a meal site, it brought nutrition to senior citizens and others in need. Mayor Kelly, who also serves as executive director of Gateway Community Action Partnership, has shared that the city was able to distribute excess food received from local farmers, from the farm that Gateway runs, and from donations from area supermarkets. And since the Healthy Food Express is also a mobile library, it distributes educational materials to the children and youth who participate. This year, the city plans to add an awning to the bus to provide shelter from the hot summer sun and a PA system to broadcast the arrival of the bus.

Mayor Kelly says the bus will go to "where the need is, from Bridgeton and beyond." Sites include housing projects, city streets, parks and libraries. "We have hungry children and hungry citizens in our communities and not everyone can make it to a meal site," he notes. "We're looking to partner with other organizations that would like to work with us, to spread out and make sure we find the right sites that will feed as many children as we can."

The Summer Food Service Program is a wonderful program, but, as with all programs, there are ways to improve it. For example, the bi-partisan Summer Meals Act, H.R. 203, introduced by Representatives Young (R-AK) and Larsen (D-OR) includes a number of provisions that improve access to summer meals. It would allow sponsors to feed children year-round through the Summer Food Service Program, dramatically reducing the administrative work for those

providing meals during the summer and after school; it would lower the area eligibility threshold from 50 to 40 percent, allowing more rural and suburban communities to participate; it would allow all sites to serve a third meal; and it would provide funding for transportation grants. And finally, the Summer EBT provides an important new strategy that has been shown to reduce food insecurity, and the Stop Summer Hunger bill introduced by Representative Davis (D-CA) in the 114 Congress would expand Summer EBT and dramatically reduce hunger during the summer.

It is also critically important that we look closely at the need for child care during the summer months. Summer food and summer programs, like those being funded through the 21st Century Community Learning Center, are there to meet that gap. Congress should invest more in summer programs that provide the platform for serving summer meals.

All of the meals that are served must meet the federal nutrition standards, which must be maintained or even improved to ensure that our most vulnerable children receive the healthiest meals possible.

I would like to close on a personal note. I was primarily a single parent from the time my daughter was age 3 until she was 11. During that time, I was lucky enough to be able to fill my summer child care gap with our town camp. It was an affordable option, even for a parent working at a private non-profit organization. That town camp was invaluable to me. It provided a safe place for me to leave my daughter. I knew she would be looked after and fed and that she would enjoy activities that I didn't have the time or money to provide for her. This is the kind of support the Summer Food Service Program and the activities it is built around provides for desperate parents during the long summer months. We must do everything we can to strengthen and support summer food and summer programs to ensure that every child is fed, every day.