

# CHILD NUTRITION REAUTHORIZATION

## Opportunities to Strengthen Food Services for Children

By Julie Zorb

More than 16 million children live in food-insecure households in the United States. In 2013, Catholic Charities agencies reached more than 1.2 million of them through feeding and nutrition programs.

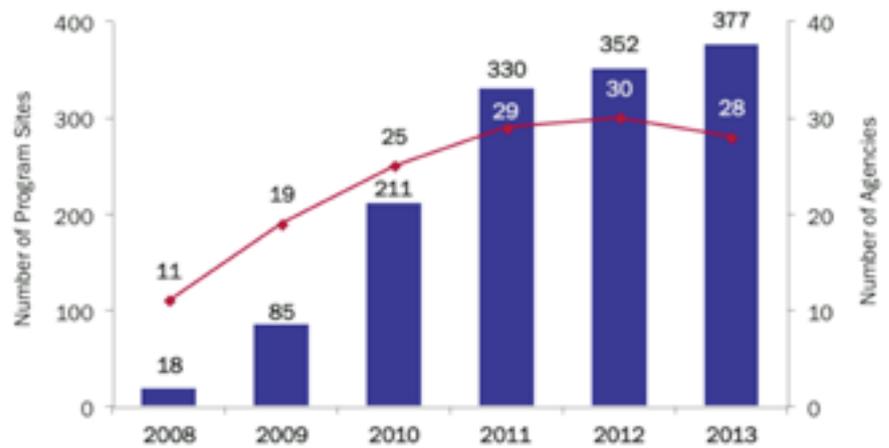
This work and the resulting impact on child hunger are under examination this year as Congress deliberates on the next act authorizing the major federal child nutrition programs. The most recent authorization, through the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010, is set to expire on September 30, 2015, leaving Congress several months before then to examine the key programs that fall under it and design any legislative changes to the programs. This child nutrition reauthorization (often abbreviated to CNR) covers the following major child feeding programs: the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) as well as the smaller Special Milk and Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Programs.

While all of these programs play vital roles in feeding hungry children, Catholic Charities agencies engage primarily with three: the Summer Food Service Program, the Child and Adult Food Care Program and WIC. The direct experience of working with these programs is invaluable for identifying ways to maximize access to nutritious food for children year round. Two agencies' experiences with SFSP and CACFP demonstrate the opportunity to identify recommendations from practice to influence this year's policy discussions.

### **Summer Food Service Program – Expanding Access**

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) reimburses schools, local government programs and nonprofit institutions for meals served to children during the summer months. More than 30 million children receive free and reduced price lunches during the school year through the National School Lunch Program (19.2 million qualify for completely free meals), yet only 2.4 million children are reached through SFSP sites.

## Growth of Summer Lunch Programs in the Catholic Charities Network



In 2013, 28 Catholic Charities agencies helped fill the gap, serving summer meals at 377 sites. Since 2008, the number of summer meal sites in the network has increased more than twenty-fold, from just 18 sites operated in 2008.

Catholic Social Services (CSS) of Anchorage, Alaska, has been operating a summer meal site since 2011, from its St. Francis House food pantry. Located across the street from a high school that provides free lunch to all students due to high poverty in the neighborhood, CSS knew that the 115 families served daily through their food pantry were facing increased needs during the summer months without school lunches for their children. Partnering with the Food Bank of Alaska, CSS's summer meal program at St. Francis House serves from the day after school lets out until the day before school begins again. The impact of this location has been substantial, but CSS is looking for opportunities to expand.

"There are definitely more children to reach," said Linda Bond, program director of St. Francis House. "We will keep going."

They may expand their reach by working with a nearby parish to host a second site, but CSS also has identified a structural change to the program that would allow them to expand services to the children in their community. They've noted that many children, especially teenagers with responsibility for other siblings or who are working summer jobs, ask to pick up a meal and take it with them so they can meet their other responsibilities. However, federal regulations require that the meal be eaten on site.

This highlights just one opportunity for reform in the reauthorization process that could improve access by increasing flexibility.

### Child and Adult Care Food Program – Improving Nutrition

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) reimburses child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start locations, after-school programs, family homeless shelters and adult day care centers for nutritious meals provided to eligible individuals in their care. In 2013, 67

Catholic Charities agencies received CACFP funds to reimburse meals served at programs they operate or sponsor.

Catholic Charities, Inc. of the Diocese of Wilmington is the largest sponsor agency for CACFP in Delaware. The agency oversees CACFP meal reimbursements for 22 independent child care centers and 250 day care homes that serve roughly 3,000 children each day. Catholic Charities covers the administrative responsibilities for the program so that these smaller sites can access more easily the CACFP funds. This includes providing training on nutrition guidelines, conducting monitoring visits and handling administrative paperwork to process the meal reimbursements.

Staff point out several advantages of a nonprofit like Catholic Charities providing this monitoring role rather than a state agency, including the ability to leverage their additional services for greater impact on the children.

"Because we're Catholic Charities, and we do more than CACFP, we're able to offer more," said Executive Director Richelle Vible.

This can mean referring families to a variety of services, which last year included a special partnership with the Payless Gives Shoes 4 Kids program. This program provided shoes and socks for children at three of the daycares the agency oversees through CACFP.

Joanne Varnes, program manager of CACFP, also stresses the importance and success of the nutrition standards for meals reimbursed through the program: "Daycare centers and homes are successfully adopting stricter nutrition guidelines, and it's working for the benefit of the children. Stricter guidelines mean better nutrition for the children."

Through training and assistance from Catholic Charities, the sites have successfully implemented the new nutrition guidelines, which has paid off with improved life outcomes for the children in their care, such as decreased obesity. Varnes notes that these nutrition guidelines for day care centers and homes are stricter than those being implemented in the National School Lunch Program. Those nutrition standards promise



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*Angel Gutierrez, vice president of community development and outreach services for Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, presents at a Congressional briefing on April 27, 2015.*

to be one of the most contentious topics in the overall child nutrition reauthorization process, but the success of nutritional guideline implementation in CACFP may offer a model in those discussions.

Varnes highlights another area for potential program improvement. “The level of paperwork is crazy!” Delaware still requires many records to be kept by hand and in hard copy, rather than electronically. This keeps her staff in the office unnecessarily, rather than out in the field monitoring, training and assisting. Some states have systems that improve efficiency by allowing CACFP sites to file reports electronically. Providing for technology upgrades would increase efficiency and ultimately benefit the children fed through the program.

### The Road to Reauthorization — Opportunities for Impact

In 2013, Pope Francis said, “The scandal of the millions of people who suffer from hunger should not paralyze us, but rather move us to act—everyone, individuals, families, communities, institutions, governments—to eliminate this injustice.”

As Pope Francis has called, we have an obligation to respond to the injustice of 16 million food-insecure children in America not with paralysis, but with action. Catholic Charities agencies take direct action against child hunger in their daily ministries, but in this time of public dialogue on broader systems, also have an opportunity to amplify those actions through advocacy. As faith-based organizations with direct experience administering and delivering federal child nutrition programs, Catholic Charities agencies have a particularly strong role to play in advancing reauthorization by not only calling on Congress to fulfill its moral obligation to ensure that no child in America goes hungry, but by also providing practical solutions to improve the current programs that help achieve that vision.

CCUSA, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Catholic Education Association and other national Catholic partners have coalesced around three core principles for the reauthorization:

- Improve access and flexibility for child nutrition and school-based meal programs to respond to local needs.
- Invest in resources and protect from harmful cuts and changes the hunger and nutrition programs that feed hungry children and expectant and breastfeeding mothers throughout the year.
- Protect recent gains made in eligibility and certification so that more children get the food they need for their healthy development.

Hundreds of advocates elevated these principles on Capitol Hill during the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in February. Now, Congress has begun to hold hearings on the specific programs, and the time is ripe to share local examples like those from Anchorage and Delaware that show how these programs are operating and how they can be improved to maximize children’s access to nutritious food.

Angel Gutierrez, vice president of community development and outreach services for Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, seized this opportunity for advocacy, presenting on his agency’s efforts at a recent Congressional briefing in Washington, DC. Catholic Charities in Chicago has the largest summer meal program in the Catholic Charities network, with 316,000 meals served last summer over 54 days across 148 partner locations, including 60 sites along mobile delivery routes.

Drawing on this vast experience, Gutierrez built the case for increased flexibility in summer meal delivery, explaining how waivers for violent neighborhoods and extreme heat have afforded their agency the ability to deliver meals to children more safely and effectively. Like Anchorage, their experience demonstrates that flexibility in regard to the congregate feeding requirement is a “natural no-brainer” that improves child nutrition. CCUSA will continue to draw on the direct practice and experience of Catholic Charities agencies across the country to identify and elevate common sense reforms such as these to improve federal child nutrition programs up for reauthorization this year. ■

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