

Harkin Statement -- Hearing on Improving Nutrition for America's Children

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Harkin Statement -- Hearing on Improving Nutrition for America's Children in Difficult Economic Times

- As Prepared for Delivery-

"Today's hearing continues this committee's ongoing efforts to address issues of child nutrition and health. In our first hearing in December of last year, I spoke bluntly about the very real and damaging long-term health problems that we face in this country. Overweight and obesity, even among our children, have reached epidemic levels in America, raising the specter that our children will not live as long as their parents.

"Compounding these problems is a health care system that is ill-equipped to prevent disease. We must reorient our health care system so that it focuses on preventing diet-related illnesses and promoting good nutrition and wellness. As the witnesses in our last hearing outlined very clearly, USDA's child nutrition programs are a tremendous opportunity to make a lasting impact on the nutrition and eating habits of our children. A stronger, targeted investment in those programs must be a part of a comprehensive federal response to poor nutrition among our children.

"Our witnesses today will present us with some of the particular challenges and opportunities that we face in improving child nutrition, both when kids are in school and when they are not.

"We must start early. The WIC Program has long been one of our nation's most effective public health programs and has proven itself time and time again. Our child care settings also present us with a unique and often overlooked opportunity to reach children before they enter kindergarten and expose them to the right kind of foods and eating habits.

"With over 30 million kids eating federally assisted lunches, the National School Lunch Program is perhaps our best opportunity to improve child nutrition and health. Research has shown that children who eat school lunches have higher intakes of a range of essential vitamins and minerals than children who consume lunches from other sources.

"However, while the quality of school meals has gradually improved over the years, much work remains to be done to bring them in line with the Dietary Guidelines. We know for example that two-thirds of elementary schools offer meals that exceed the standards for saturated fat, which is strongly linked to heart disease.

"One of the solutions is to improve school meals: offering foods that have more of the good stuff (vitamins and minerals) and less of the bad (added sugar, sodium, and fat). That means more low- and no-fat milk, leaner meats, whole grain products, and fruits and vegetables, particularly fresh. While that may seem like an easy recommendation in principle, many school districts will tell you it is much more difficult to put into practice for a variety of reasons, particularly cost.

“Fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains tend to cost more than less healthful alternatives, so it is not surprising that some school food service directors find it difficult to offer these foods given their limited budgets — budgets which are stretched even further during an economic downturn.

“That being said, there are school districts out there that are working within their current budget and still going the extra mile for their kids by creating an overall nutrition environment that teaches kids the importance of eating healthy, provides more healthful meals for them to eat, and encourages healthy living by requiring regular physical education and activity. We will hear testimony today from one of those districts, located in the city of Knoxville in my home state of Iowa.

“To be sure, we should not assume that every school district’s budget allows them to replicate the success of school districts like Knoxville. Perhaps the most important question it raises for this committee is how Congress can best help places like Knoxville continue their good work and also help other school districts meet the challenge of offering more healthful meals.

“One welcome sign of help came in the President’s recently released budget, in which the President proposed \$1 billion per year in additional funding for child nutrition. This is a strong indication of how serious the new administration is about ending childhood hunger and teaching healthy eating habits at an early age so that kids are more likely to grow up to be healthy adults. Now Congress must make good on this proposal by dedicating real resources in our budget.

“A significant investment in the child nutrition reauthorization by Congress would be its own down payment on comprehensive health care reform that would acknowledge the very real budget difficulties that school districts, day care centers and other providers face while also ensuring that kids are getting the most balanced, nutritious meals possible. I look forward to working with the other members of the committee and hearing from our witnesses today about how we can address the challenges and opportunities we face to doing just that.”

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