



## **Ending Hunger in America: Challenges, Opportunities, and Building the Political Will to Succeed**

### **Testimony of Ayesha Curry, Co-Founder of the Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation and No Kid Hungry Ambassador, Before the House Committee on Rules, U.S. House of Representatives**

Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify to the importance of ensuring that every child has the nutritious food they need to thrive every day. My name is Ayesha Curry, and I am the co-founder of Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation and an ambassador for the No Kid Hungry campaign.

The Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation is committed to unlocking the amazing potential of every child by fighting to end childhood hunger, ensuring students have access to a quality education, and providing safe places for all children to play and be active. Focused on youth in underserved communities, our work is anchored around ensuring every child has access to three vital ingredients to a happy, healthy, and successful childhood: nutritious food, a quality education from early-childhood through college completion, and the opportunity to play and be physically active. Children are our future, and we are deeply dedicated to empowering them and opening doors for their futures.

We've made an impact through our collaborations with No Kid Hungry, World Central Kitchen, the Alameda County Community Food Bank, and so many other incredible organizations, but to address the size and scope of the hunger crisis, **we need your help.**

Meeting this challenge requires concerted, coordinated action on a national level.

#### **The hunger crisis in America is urgent.**

One in six kids in the United States, and one in four kids in the Bay Area, is affected by hunger. This hunger affects everything:

- The ability to learn
- Their physical and mental health
- The opportunity to reach their full potential

Every missed meal counts for a kid, because an empty stomach that hurts today also hurts their futures. And, this is especially true for kids from families of color, who face hunger, poverty, and hardship at even higher levels. I've personally seen hunger in my hometown of Oakland – but I know that no community or Congressional District - urban, suburban, or rural – is free from this issue.

Food is an essential school supply. When kids don't get the food they need, it's harder for them to learn or focus in class, affecting everything from test scores to graduation rates. Giving kids the best opportunity for success starts with ensuring that they have the nutrition they need to thrive.

#### **Fighting hunger in our community.**

I'm a working mother. My husband and I have three little ones at home. Like every mom, I want my kids to grow up strong, healthy, and happy. I know how important a good breakfast is to help them focus and learn, and how cranky they can get when they're hungry.



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Families are working so hard to make ends meet, often working multiple jobs and making tough choices between buying groceries or paying the rent. But no parent should have to deal with the pain and stress of wondering how they are going to put enough food on the table for their kids tonight. And that's why I'm also an advocate.

The work of Eat. Learn. Play. is rooted in being a village for those who don't always have one. I want to share a story of a loving mother, who like many, faced incredible hardships this past year. The effects of COVID-19 created an unprecedented challenge in our community. Before the start of the pandemic, nearly 35% of children in Oakland struggled with food insecurity regularly, including 18,000 students, 88% who are children of color, who relied on school for two or more of their daily meals. Ensuring these students continued to have access to meals once schools closed became our top priority.

Christina is a Black woman from the San Antonio neighborhood in Oakland, CA. She is a single mother of two elementary school-aged children, who attend Garfield Elementary School, a part of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). Christina's children are among the 18,000 students that have counted on their schools for a significant percentage of their nutritional needs. On March 13 of last year, OUSD's school buildings were shut down because of the pandemic, and parents like Christina were left wondering where their child's next meal will come from. Shortly after that, Christina was laid off from her service industry job because her business closed when local shelter-in-place orders went into effect.

Christina's story is similar to the 10,000 Oakland families who showed up twice a week to receive meals during the pandemic at OUSDs meal distribution sites. Thanks to critical federal nutrition programs and the heroic work of OUSD school workers, Oakland students have continued to have access to healthy and nutritious meals. This past year has shown us how critical nutritious school meals are in order to keep children healthy and on track to reach their full potential.

### **These Federal Nutrition Programs feed kids, but we need Congress to make them stronger.**

Childhood hunger is solvable. Federal Nutrition Programs are essential for kids to get the food they need, no matter where they live, or what time of year it is. But to serve as many kids as we need to reach right now, we need these programs to be stronger. And that means action from Congress. Charities and non-profits cannot do it alone.

For example:

- Programs like **SNAP and WIC** are grocery benefits that make sure parents can feed their kids at home. These programs have well-documented benefits for kids.<sup>[1][2][3][4]</sup> Increasing these benefits and modernizing their administration will mean that families can buy more of the groceries they need, when they need them. That is especially important now with rising grocery prices and with so many parents out of work, particularly in the service industry.<sup>[5]</sup> No parent should have to choose between going to work to keep their job and going to the SNAP or WIC office to keep their benefits.
- **School meals** make sure kids have the nutrition they need to focus and stay nourished during the school day. They also play a role in kids showing up for school – studies commissioned by No Kid Hungry showed that making breakfast part of the school day can reduce chronic absenteeism and lead to better student outcomes.<sup>[6]</sup> School meals also tend to be the healthiest meals that children get.<sup>[7]</sup> This year, the USDA made sure schools could adapt their programs to reach kids even when they were learning from home, and we need to keep these programs flexible and strong.
- **Summer** is the hardest time to reach kids with the food they need because they're out of school. Kids with working parents often lack safe transportation options to get to meal sites. Combined with other



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challenges like weather shutting down outdoor sites and bureaucratic red tape, six out of seven kids who needed summer meals pre-pandemic were missing out.<sup>[8]</sup> But last year, we saw what happens when schools and community organizations were allowed to adapt their programs – letting parents pick up multiple meals at a time, or dropping meals off at a child’s house. This worked: the number of meals served in July 2020 was 160% higher compared to July 2019.<sup>[9]</sup>

Another highly successful way we can reach kids over the summer is evident in the Pandemic EBT program, which provides families with kids who qualify for the free and reduced-price meals with funds on an EBT card while schools are closed due to the public health emergency. It has shown incredible reach and efficacy. This builds on the success of the Summer EBT demonstration program which has been shown to be extremely effective at alleviating summer hunger.

**I applaud Congress and the White House for expanding the P-EBT program through this summer when kids and families struggle the most. We will need continued help from Congress to make sure programs help hungry kids during future summer months.**

All of these nutrition programs work together to reach kids of all ages where they live, where they learn, and where they play. For some hard-working families who need a little help, participating in one program may work well for them and be enough to fill a gap. For many others a combination of federal nutrition programs ensures their kids have enough to eat – for instance, when her kid gets free or reduced-price meals at school, a mom can stretch her SNAP benefits to cover more of the month and put healthier dinners on the table.

### **Conclusion**

At home in my role as a mom, and at Eat. Learn. Play. in my role as an advocate, I’m working hard to make sure all kids can live out their dreams. I’m continually inspired by the hunger heroes in our communities who are doing amazing work to feed kids every single day. It takes a village to meet the level of food insecurity that exists in communities across the country, especially during the pandemic.

Our collaboration with No Kid Hungry, World Central Kitchen, the Alameda County Community Food Bank, OUSD, and so many other wonderful organizations, has made an incredible impact for hungry kids and families – we’ve helped serve 16 million meals since COVID began.

**But charities alone cannot fill all the gaps to make plates full and children whole.**

Congress has the power to change this. With your leadership, these programs can be stronger, more flexible, and reach more kids. People used to say hunger is a nonpartisan issue – **I say we all need to be KID PARTISAN.**

I urge Congress to support and strengthen federal nutrition policies to close the summer meal gap, strengthen school meals programs, and ensure benefits like SNAP and WIC are reaching the kids and families who need them. As we rebuild our economy post-COVID, we have the opportunity to build back hunger-free.

Finally, I would like to invite all of you to come out and see our work in Oakland, to meet the people behind these stories, to learn their triumphs and struggles first-hand, and see the difference that federal nutrition programs make in their lives. I also encourage you to get to know the families that are struggling in your districts and to understand the trade-offs and challenges they are facing so that as you craft policies you can make sure the needs of those families and their children are at the center.

Thank you for allowing me to meet with you today, I am grateful for our time together.



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[3] John T. Cook et al., *Child Food Insecurity Increases Risks Posed by Household Food Insecurity to Young Children's Health*, 136 *J. Nutrition* 1073-76 (2006).

[4] Corneliu Bolbocean et al., National Bureau of Economic Research, U.S. Safety Net Programs and Early Life Skills Formation: Results from a Prospective Longitudinal Cohort Study (2018), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24832.pdf>.

[5] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Economic News Release: Consumer Price Index Summary, April 13, 2021. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm>

[6] No Kid Hungry. Evaluating the Impact of Breakfast After the Bell on Chronic Absenteeism. (2019). <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/resource/study-chronic-absenteeism-and-breakfast-after-bell>

[7] Junxiu Liu et al. *Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018*. *JAMA Netw Open* ;4(4):e215262 (2021). [https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453?utm\\_source=For The Media&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=ftm\\_links&utm\\_term=040921](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453?utm_source=For%20The%20Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_term=040921)

[8] FRAC Summer Nutrition Status Report, June 2020. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/FRAC-Summer-Nutrition-Report-2020.pdf>

[9] No Kid Hungry Blog: New Data Shows How Participation in Nutrition Programs Has Changed During the Pandemic, February 2021. <https://www.nokidhungry.org/blog/new-data-shows-how-participation-nutrition-programs-has-changed-during-pandemic-0>