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Testimony to the National Commission on Hunger
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Good morning members of the Commission. My name is Tia Shimada. I'm here on behalf of California Food Policy Advocates. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and for the important work that you're doing across the country. My colleagues and I truly appreciate your efforts to hear our perspectives and our recommendations to address hunger and food insecurity.

For over twenty years, California Food Policy Advocates has been dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of low-income Californians by increasing access to nutritious, affordable food. Much of our work focuses on strengthening the federal nutrition programs. As they exist today, the programs offer essential resources to households that are struggling to meet their most basic needs. These resources, when they do reach low-income Californians, help to mitigate food insecurity and keep households from falling further into poverty.

That success offers promise for eliminating hunger and supporting long-term health, productivity, and wellbeing. That success also underlies the urgency in connecting all low-income children, adults, and seniors with the federal nutrition programs for which they are eligible. Given the collective expertise of the speakers scheduled for this hearing, it's a subset of the child nutrition programs that I will be testifying about today.

Three in five of California's public school students are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.¹ That means at least 3.4 million children in our state could benefit from the federal programs designed to help meet their nutritional needs in and outside of school time.² But that's not happening. Millions of California's most vulnerable children are going without the healthy meals they need to learn, grown, and achieve at their fullest potential. In fact, more than 2 million of California's low-income households with children are unable to consistently afford enough food.³

Participation gaps in the child nutrition programs have persisted for years across this state. That persistence has helped to keep food insecurity part of the unfair, unnecessary, and unacceptable reality for California kids. There are well-tested

solutions to this problem. It's not so much a matter of what we should do to address food insecurity among children, but a matter of when we are willing to do so.

In order to connect children with all of the nutrition resources they need and deserve, we must effectively and efficiently identify children who are eligible for K-12 nutrition programs. Enrolling students in free school meal programs through direct certification using existing health and human services data is efficient for administrators and families. Direct certification enables low-income students to benefit from school meals without families or administrators being burdened by the completion, collection, and processing of school meal applications.

California has made a concerted effort to improve its direct certification processes. More work remains to be done. A recent report from USDA shows that California falls well below the federal performance standard for direct certification with CalFresh and CalWORKs (SNAP and TANF) data.⁴ We encourage USDA to uphold the performance standard and support states like California in meeting it, particularly through improved data matching systems. State and federal leaders should optimize existing technology and ensure that all eligible students are directly certified.

California's chronically low CalFresh participation rate means fewer of our kids are eligible for direct certification with CalFresh data, despite actually being in need. That makes direct certification through other data sources especially important for our state. In 2014, California was approved to participate in a demonstration project that will evaluate the use of Medi-Cal (Medicaid) data in directly certifying up to 225,000 low-income students. School districts participating in the demonstration project will use the much more comprehensive Medi-Cal data set to identify children who are eligible for free school meals but were not enrolled through CalFresh data. A federally authorized expansion of the very limited demonstration currently granted to California would enable definitively eligible students to be efficiently enrolled in school meal programs.

Beyond the challenges of enrolling eligible students in meal programs, California is challenged to serve those children who are deemed eligible and therefore are also at the greatest risk for food insecurity. With my remaining time, I would like to share a few details about two of the persistent nutrition gaps that affect millions of kids in our state.

Roughly 95% percent of California's low-income, public school students attend schools that technically offer the federal School Breakfast Program. But school breakfast only reaches 35% of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.⁵ That means on an average school day in California, 2.2 million of our most vulnerable kids miss out on a free or low-cost breakfast that could reduce the strain on family food budgets.⁶

Pioneering school districts across the country have shown that when breakfast is integrated into the school day, rather than being served very early in the morning before

kids are able to arrive on campus, the program works the way it's intended to work: hungry students get the food they need to function and focus. We urge Congress and USDA to hold states, schools, and themselves accountable for supporting and implementing after-the-bell breakfast models, which have been shown to most effectively reach students in need of school meals.⁷

While the negative effects of food insecurity on children's physical and mental health and cognitive function may seem especially relevant to school meal programs, children need access to nutritious meals all year round for all the same reasons. When school is out for the summer, many low-income kids lose access to the affordable meals that are available during the academic year. More specifically, nearly 2 million low-income children in California who benefit from free or reduced-price school lunches are not served by any of the federal summer meal programs.⁸

When and where the summer meal programs are able to reach kids, they provide a tremendous service. However, this approach on its own is unlikely to meet the nutritional needs of all eligible and food-insecure children. Providing a summertime monthly benefit to low-income households with children to purchase groceries via EBT is a well-tested, efficient method to ensure that children receive nutritious meals when school is not in session.

As of 2015, ten states and tribal organizations have implemented Summer EBT demonstration projects. Rigorous evaluation has found that Summer EBT reduces food insecurity among children and their families.⁹ We ask Congress to authorize a nationwide Summer EBT program as was recently proposed in the *Stop Child Summer Hunger Act* (H.R. 2715 / S. 1539) introduced by Representative Susan Davis (CA-53) and Senator Patty Murray (WA).

As Congress considers this action, we also ask that USDA expand existing Summer EBT projects to additional sites, including California. There is immense potential to reduce food insecurity among children by bringing Summer EBT to California our state. There are more children in California who are income-eligible for free or reduced-price school meals than in any other state¹⁰ -- and California's summer nutrition gap is the second largest in the nation.¹¹

As an advocate born and raised in California, I often worry whether decision makers will see the scale of food insecurity in our state as a foregone conclusion rather than an urgent call to action. But with technical efficiencies like direct certification, practical approaches like after-the-bell breakfast, and effective innovations like Summer EBT, it's clear that solutions can be brought to bear. We ask Congress and USDA to drive these efforts and we urge the Commission to prioritize these asks. Thank you for your time. I welcome any questions you may have and look forward to continued discussion of these critical issues.

¹ California Food Policy Advocates, *School Meal Analysis 2013-14*. Available at: http://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/ChildNutrition_CFPAPublications/SchoolMealAnalysis-StateSummary-2013-14.pdf.

² Ibid

³ UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. *2011-12 California Health Interview Survey*. Available at: <http://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/Pages/home.aspx>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Direct Certification in the National Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, School Year 2013–2014 by Quinn Moore, Kevin Conway, Brandon Kyler, and Andrew Gothro. Project Officer Dennis Ranalli. Report CN-13-DC. Alexandria, VA: May 2015. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/NSLPDirectCertification2014.pdf>

⁵ California Food Policy Advocates, *School Meal Analysis 2013-14*. Available at: <http://cfpa.net/school-meal-analysis-2013-14>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ California Food Policy Advocates. *Breakfast After the Bell: Research Overview*. Available at: <http://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/SBP/Legislation/AB1240-ResearchOverview-2015.pdf>.

⁸ California Food Policy Advocates. *School's Out...Who Ate? A Report on Summer Nutrition in California*. Available at: <http://cfpa.net/ChildNutrition/Summer/CFPAPublications/SOWA-FullReport-2015.pdf>.

⁹ United States Department of Agriculture, Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Evaluation Findings for the Full Implementation Year 2012 Final Report. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SEBTC2012.pdf>.

¹⁰ Food Research and Action Center. Poverty rate and less than 185% of FPL for children in 2013. Available at: http://frac.org/pdf/poverty_children_2013.pdf.

¹¹ Food Research and Action Center. Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report. Table 1. June 2015. Available at: http://frac.org/pdf/2015_summer_nutrition_report.pdf.