

Good afternoon Dr. Chilton, Mr. Doar, members of the National Commission on Hunger:

My name is Ali Avery and I'm a graduate student who has been assisting the Maine Hunger Initiative with the Summer Food Service Program program sites in South Portland, Portland, and Freeport this summer. I want to thank the Commission for holding this hearing and for offering the opportunity to testify.

The Summer Food Service Program, also known as the Summer Meals for Kids Program, focuses specifically on combating child hunger at various meal sites throughout the state. Families with children who receive free and reduced meals at school during the year must often stretch budgets and seek additional food assistance during the summer vacation months. For a family with two children who qualify for a school breakfast and lunch, summer can mean the cost of 20 extra meals added to a weekly family budget that is already tight. The Summer Meals Food Service Program is an effective response to childhood and teenage hunger.

I have spent the summer working for the Summer Meals program and I can attest that the level of food insecurity for children in our community is far greater than meets the eye. One of the meal sites where I have spent a lot of time is Brick Hill in South Portland. Brick Hill offers a breakfast meal program for the kids 18 and under, usually feeding between 45-63 kids per day. This site had been fairly successful overall, primarily due to its accessibility. Brick Hill is a neighborhood community, so the majority if not all of the children and teens coming for breakfast every day live in the neighborhood and can walk to the meal site. The Redbank meal site in South Portland, which offers dinner for kids 18 and under during the week, has also been successful due to easy accessibility. Unfortunately, this isn't the case for every community. One of my coworkers in Naples mentioned once that accessibility was an enormous factor inhibiting attendance to the local Summer Meals site in her community. Families who live farther out or out on route 302, for example, have struggled to get to the meal site due to lack of transportation. In rural areas like the Lakes Region a mobile meal site would be ideal. The problem is that the sponsor does not have the funds to purchase a van or bus that can be used as a mobile meal site.

Many kids have confessed to the site coordinator of the Moore Park and South Paris sites that the summer lunch offered at the site is the only full meal they receive each day. The brain structure is the most vulnerable to nutritional insults early in development (Lyle et al, 1984). Young children in food insecure households are 40% more likely to score at developmental/behavioral risk than other low income children (Rose-Jacob, 2008. ) Recent FRAC sponsored studies have illuminated that food insecure children suffer 2-4 times as many health problems as other children within the same income level. Common health issues resulting from food insecurity for children are stomach aches, head aches, ear infections, higher hospitalization rates, iron-deficiency anemia, decreased bone mineral density, more susceptible to lead poisoning, and poor oral health.

Outreach has been another challenging part of my position with the Summer Food Service Program. The Summer Meals lunch program at Kaler Elementary School in South Portland, for example, has consistently struggled with low attendance. During the weeks in which Summer School is offered, Kaler feeds anywhere between 109-154 kids lunch per day. However, when the kids that are enrolled in camps, summer classes, or various other summer programs leave, hardly any of the neighborhood children are attending the lunch program. I visited Kaler numerous times throughout the summer to witness this first hand, and the highest number I saw for neighborhood attendance was once 11 children out of the 142 who had been fed lunch that day. Even with a big summer splash event, which included a dance performance, arts and crafts and face painting, I was really only able to bring in a half a dozen neighborhood kids at best. If the site sponsor has more money for outreach, marketing and promotion and programming we could offer more robust programming after the summer school and camps come to an end.

I am reaching out to you today to stress the need for increased USDA funding that can be used for programming, outreach and transportation.

### **Let me close by summarizing my recommendations**

1. ***USDA should increase the federal reimbursement rate for programming.*** Permitting reimbursements for things like educational materials (books, pens and paper, etc.) or things to encourage physical activity (games, balls, a Frisbee, etc.) in order to increase attendance rates and make sure every kid in the area is food secure. Currently reimbursements only cover costs of the meals themselves, but my work in the field has taught me that it isn't enough to simply provide meals. Many kids demonstrate a sense of shame in having to come to government-sponsored meals, which has consistently been an enormous roadblock to increasing attendance at meal sites. Allowing reimbursements for educational and physical activities will help advocacy programs like MHI to establish fun environments for the kids at the meal sites so that they can feel comfortable, safe, and willing to come get a free nutritious meal. In addition, it would be helpful if these reimbursement rates could also pay for sponsors to higher part time volunteer coordinators for meal sites. Part of my job this summer was volunteer coordinating, but it was incredibly challenging to do this amongst multiple other programming and event planning focuses. Thus, hiring part-time volunteers to solely focus on volunteer coordinating would be especially helpful in making sure every site has enough volunteer coverage, as well as making sure that those focusing on programming are able to put their full attention on it.
2. ***There should be more funding put into mobile meal sites in order to address food insecurity resulting from lack of transportation.*** Mobile

meals sites have proved successful in addressing inaccessibility issues to the Summer Meals Program sites in rural areas by going directly into neighborhoods offering meals to make sure kids are eating and then leaving afterwards. These mobile meal sites have been critical in addressing food insecurity of families who cannot access their community meal sites. As these meals on wheels programs can be expensive to facilitate, local government should allot more funding towards mobile sites. ***Congress should require states to apply for funding for the USDA Demonstration Project, and to develop necessary collaborations with each region.*** States should be required to submit a proposal to USDA and to establish a comprehensive plan around implementation.

**Thank you**