

Amendment 3584 – Requires the Government Accountability Office to identify the number, cost, and effectiveness of federal hunger and nutrition programs

The federal government spends tens of billions of dollars every year on programs intended to address hunger, obesity and nutrition. Despite this massive federal commitment, the U.S. continues to struggle with each of these related issues.

A cost effectiveness review would assist Congress and federal agencies to better target federal resources and improve outcomes for those impacted.

This amendment simply requires the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to submit a report to Congress that contains:

- A complete listing of federal programs that seek to address hunger, nutrition, or food assistance;
- The amount spent on federal nutrition efforts over the past 20 years;
- A review of the effectiveness of each;
- The amount of food assistance that is being provided by the federal government; and
- The overall trends in hunger and obesity in the U.S. over the past 20 years

GAO would also be required to determine the total number of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) employees and the number of farmers and other agricultural producers that receive USDA assistance.

Proper Nutrition Improves Health and Saves Money

Proper nutrition is essential for good health and also saves money.

Nutritional, or dietary, factors contribute substantially to the burden of preventable illnesses and premature deaths in the United States. In fact, dietary factors are associated with 4 of the 10 leading causes of

death: coronary heart disease (CHD), some types of cancer, stroke, and type 2 diabetes. These health conditions are estimated to cost society over \$200 billion each year in medical expenses and lost productivity.^[1]

Many diseases are associated with overweight and obesity. Persons who are overweight or obese are at increased risk for high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, respiratory problems, and some types of cancer. The health outcomes related to these diseases, however, often can be improved through weight loss or, at a minimum, no further weight gain. Total costs (medical costs and lost productivity) attributable to obesity alone amounted to an estimated \$99 billion in 1995.^[2]

The Federal Government Spend Tens of Billions of Dollars Every Year on Numerous Food Programs

There are numerous domestic assistance programs spread throughout the federal government that spend tens of billions of dollars every year to ensure access to food and proper nutrition.

The Department of Health and Human Services and even the Department of Homeland Security administer nutrition related programs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture alone oversees almost 20 domestic nutrition assistance programs, spending some \$54 billion in Fiscal Year 2006. These include the Food Stamp program, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), Community Food Projects, the Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), fresh fruit and vegetable initiatives, child nutrition programs like the School Lunch program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (the WIC program), and the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition program.^[3]

^[1] http://www.healthypeople.gov/document/HTML/Volume2/19Nutrition.htm#_Toc490383127

^[2] http://www.healthypeople.gov/document/HTML/Volume2/19Nutrition.htm#_Toc490383127

^[3] Joe Richardson. "Domestic Food Assistance: The 2007 Farm Bill and Other Legislation in the 110th Congress," Congressional Research Service, August 8, 2007.

The largest of the nutrition assistance programs is the Food Stamp program. At \$33 billion in Fiscal Year 2006, it represents about 95 percent of the federal spending for farm bill nutrition assistance programs. According to the Congressional Research Service, “it now also is seen as the government’s primary response to important concerns about the overall ‘food security’ status of the low-income population.” Since the 2002, participation has increased substantially, from some 19 million persons per month to 26.4 million as of May 2007. The average monthly benefit level has jumped from \$80 a person in 2002 to \$95 in May 2007. Federal costs have grown from \$20.6 billion in 2002 to \$33 billion in 2006 and an estimated \$33.4 billion for 2007.^[4]

As the Amount Spent on Federal Nutrition Programs, So Has the Number of Americans Who Are Hungry and Obese

Despite the significant and ever increasing federal investment in food assistance and nutrition efforts, hunger and lack of proper nutrition remain significant challenges.

Hunger in American households increased by 43 percent from 1999 to 2005, according to an analysis of USDA data. The analysis, completed by the Center on Hunger and Poverty at Brandeis University, found that more than 7 million people joined the ranks of the hungry in the five year period beginning in 1999.^[5]

Likewise, there has been an alarming increase in the number of overweight and obese persons. “During the past 20 years there has been a dramatic increase in obesity in the United States,” according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.^[6] Nearly 55 percent of the U.S. adult population was defined as overweight or obese in 1988–94, compared to 46 percent in 1976–80.^[7] Results from the 2003-2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), indicate that an estimated 66 percent of U.S.

^[4] Joe Richardson. “Domestic Food Assistance: The 2007 Farm Bill and Other Legislation in the 110th Congress,” Congressional Research Service, August 8, 2007.

^[5] <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2005/10/051029093925.htm>

^[6] <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/trend/maps/>

^[7] http://www.healthypeople.gov/document/HTML/Volume2/19Nutrition.htm#_Toc490383127

adults are either overweight or obese.^[8] Obesity rates have nearly quintupled among 6- to 11-year-olds and tripled among teens and children ages 2 to 5 since the 1970s.^[9]

Some Federal Nutrition Programs Have Been Found to be Ineffective

Some federal programs, such as the USDA's Grants for Nutrition and Health^[10] and the In-House Research for Nutrition and Health^[11], have been found to be effective. Many others have not measured up as well or have never been evaluated for effectiveness.

The federal government will spend more than \$1 billion this year on nutrition education— fresh carrot and celery snacks, videos of dancing fruit, hundreds of hours of lively lessons about how great you will feel if you eat well. But an Associated Press review of scientific studies examining 57 such programs found mostly failure. Just four showed any real success in changing the way kids eat — or any promise as weapons against the growing epidemic of childhood obesity.^[12]

"Any person looking at the published literature about these programs would have to conclude that they are generally not working," said Dr. Tom Baranowski, a pediatrics professor at Houston's Baylor College of Medicine who studies behavioral nutrition.

The results have been disappointing, to say the least:

- Last year a major federal pilot program offering free fruits and vegetables to school children showed fifth graders became less willing to eat them than they had been at the start. Apparently they didn't like the taste.
- In Pennsylvania, researchers went so far as to give prizes to school children who ate fruits and vegetables.

^[8] <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/faq.htm>

^[9] "Experts: Federal Nutrition Education for Children is Failing," Associated Press, July 5, 2007

^[10] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore/summary/10003036.2006.html>

^[11] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore/summary/10003019.2006.html>

^[12] "Experts: Federal Nutrition Education for Children is Failing," Associated Press, July 5, 2007

That worked while the prizes were offered, but when the researchers came back seven months later the kids had reverted to their original eating habits: soda and chips.

- In studies where children tell researchers they are eating better or exercising more, there is usually no change in blood pressure, body size or cholesterol measures; they want to eat better, they might even think they are, but they're not.
- An evaluation of a \$7 million, 8-year-old USDA program which reaches about 388,000 students a year in the Los Angeles Unified School District found no difference in the amount of fruits and vegetables eaten by kids participating in the program and those who weren't. Teachers who spent more hours on nutrition education had no greater impact than those who didn't. And parent behavior didn't change either. "It's true, it didn't change what they actually eat," said Dr. Mike Prelip, a UCLA researcher who headed up the evaluation.

Kate Houston, deputy under secretary of the USDA's Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, oversees most federal funds, \$696 million this year, spent on childhood nutrition education in this country. Funding has steadily increased in recent years, up from \$535 million in 2003. In an interview with the Associated Press, Houston insisted the programs are successful. When asked about the many studies that don't show improvement, Houston asked for copies of the research. And she said the USDA doesn't have the resources to undertake "long term, controlled, medical modeled studies" necessary to determine the impact of its programs.^[13]

Doctors like Tom Robinson, who directs the Center for Healthy Weight at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford University, said those studies aren't needed. The research has already shown they don't work. "I think the money could be better spent," he said.

Part of the problem with not reviewing the effectiveness of the programs is that Congress continues to pour money into efforts that

^[13] "Experts: Federal Nutrition Education for Children is Failing," Associated Press, July 5, 2007

have not demonstrated results and the problems that are intended to be address continue.

A review of the Food Stamp Nutrition Education, which seeks to improve food choices and healthy lifestyles consistent with the current USDA dietary guidelines among eligible persons, has found that the program's "results not demonstrated." The Office of Management and Budget concluded that "It is unclear if funds are spent effectively to increase participation and improve nutrition-related behaviors." Yet, the program has grown from \$660,000 in 1992 to over \$147 million in 2002.^[14]

Perhaps some of the funding Congress has dedicated to this or other programs that have not demonstrated results or have failed, would have been better spent on programs that are effective.

Billions in Federal Food Assistance Have Been Misspent

The federal Food Stamp Program within the Department of Agriculture is intended to help low-income individuals and families obtain a more nutritious diet by supplementing their income with benefits to purchase food. Unfortunately this program is plagued by waste and abuse, with over \$1.6 billion in improper payments were made in Fiscal Year 2006.^[15] Two thirds of these mistakes are due to USDA caseworker errors.^[16] This amount has remained consistent over all three improper payments reporting years with little sign of demonstrative progress in reducing these pervasive problems.

The Farm Bill Creates Another Hunger Assistance Program That Does Not Provide Food

Section 4405 of the bill creates a new program, the Hunger Free Communities program, which authorizes \$50 million in grants for food banks and other entities. These grants are not intended for purchasing food or feeding the hungry.

^[14] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore/summary/10009031.2007.html>

^[15] <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07635t.pdf>

^[16] <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05245.pdf>

The grants allowed under this section fall into two categories: collaborative grants and infrastructure grants. Collaborative grants are available to service providers or nonprofit organizations for the purpose of developing and improving food services for needy populations. Infrastructure grants are available to emergency feeding organizations to cover the costs of maintaining facilities and equipment.

Feeding bureaucracy will not resolve the problem of hunger in America. Before Congress creates yet another program, existing programs that have existed for decades to address the same problem should be evaluated for effectiveness and either improved or replaced. It is wasteful to simply create duplicate programs without evaluating how taxpayer funds are currently being spent and making efforts to maximize the impact of every dollar in meeting the nutrition needs of those who may need assistance.

Better Management and Targeting of Federal Resources Would Increase the Number of Americans Who Could Be Provided Food and Nutrition Assistance

Appropriating more money or creating new government programs may be the best ways for politicians to get credit or show they care about an issue, but they are not always the best way to address a problem.

Would another nutrition or food assistance program really solve the hunger and obesity problems facing American or would better oversight and targeting of funds be a more effective solution?

Consider that the average monthly benefit of the Food Stamps program per person is \$86, or \$1,032 per year.^[17] That means that 1,550 individuals could have been provided food stamps for an entire year with the \$1.6 billion in improper payments made by the program last year.

^[17] <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp/faqs.htm#9>

According to CARE, a leading humanitarian organization, “It can cost as little as 28 cents to provide a nutritious meal for a hungry child.”^[18] The \$54 billion spent on food and nutrition programs by USDA alone in Fiscal Year 2006, could have purchased over 192,857,140 nutritious meals for children, or three health meals a day for an entire year for 176,125 children.

This Amendment Will Allow Federal Policy Makers to Better Prioritize Resources and More Efficiently Address Hunger and Nutrition Related Problems

This amendment would ensure that a careful, independent analysis of existing federal programs be conducted that could provide Congress and federal agencies with a better gauge of how to best address hunger and nutrition related issues, including a listing of programs that are most effective, which may need to be reformed, and which are no longer justifiable.

^[18] <http://www.care.org/campaigns/world-hunger/index.asp>, accessed October 26, 2007