DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Vision

Sound, appropriate nutrition is a basic foundation of health for children, beginning with the mother’s health before and during pregnancy. Good nutrition during pregnancy and childhood decreases the risk of prematurity, fetal or infant death, anemia, and subsequent obesity and other chronic illnesses. Deficiencies of key micronutrients during this vulnerable period of development from birth to 24 months can lead to delays in attention and motor development, poor short-term memory, and lower IQ scores. The effects of these micronutrient deficiencies can persist well into childhood.

Our children deserve the best possible chance at success, and that means that no child should have to struggle with food insecurity. Providing children with access to healthy meals while they are in child care, in school, and during the summer—as well as connecting families to nutritional assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—not only reduces food insecurity, but also serves as a critical support for the health, behavior, and learning of children. Children who are at-risk for food insecurity must be identified and their families connected with needed federal nutrition programs and other resources. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) must act to address the 16 million U.S. children (21 percent) who live in households that lack consistent access to adequate food. USDA must take steps to increase access, and minimize barriers, to child enrollment in federal nutrition programs.

Recommended Administrative Actions

Promote breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is the preferred feeding method for all infants, including preterm newborn infants. Breastfeeding has proven to have numerous health benefits for both mother and child. Studies show that children who are not breastfed have higher rates of mortality, meningitis, certain cancers, asthma and other respiratory illnesses, bacterial and viral infections, ear infections, juvenile diabetes, some chronic liver diseases, allergies, and obesity. The next administration should advance policies that support exclusive breastfeeding for approximately the first six months, followed by continued breastfeeding for at least the first year of a child’s life as complementary foods are introduced.

Address food insecurity. The next administration should pursue and expand innovative models to address childhood food insecurity. This means improving benefits in and access to the federal nutrition programs. The SNAP program is a crucial anti-hunger program, boosting food security, health, and economic security. But its benefits, based on the Thrifty Food Plan, need to be increased to provide families resources to obtain an adequate, healthy diet throughout the month. This inadequacy needs to be addressed. It is important as well to increase participation in SNAP among underserved groups such as low-income working families. Given the nexus between malnutrition and health (in particular, rates of obesity), the next administration should seek to maintain and enhance linkages between nutrition programs run by USDA and health programs, such as Medicaid, administered by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). For example, adjunctive eligibility between Medicaid and WIC must be maintained. Similarly, virtually all children enrolled in SNAP are financially eligible for Medicaid, yet some miss out, and others fall through the cracks when their eligibility needs to be renewed. Renewing Medicaid eligibility at the same time that families are re-certified for SNAP as part of a coordinated process could help ensure continuous enrollment in both programs. USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) could work to set performance targets for states and to promote this goal of a strong start for low-income infants and toddlers. For each of these efforts, USDA should work to engage pediatricians in models to address and reduce food insecurity.

Expand access to summer feeding. The next administration must take actions to expand access to summer food programs. These programs contribute to the healthy growth and development of low-income children by providing them with nutritious snacks and meals (often alongside recreational and educational activities), when they are unable to receive them at school. Currently, only about 16 percent of children who rely on free or reduced-price school lunch receive these meals during the summer.

Increase family access to fruits and vegetables. The next administration should invest in innovative models to promote increased access to fruits and vegetables. It should expand programs such as Farm to School, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, fruit and vegetable cash vouchers for WIC participants, and Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive grants.

Support strong, science-based dietary guidelines, especially for pregnant women and children through age two. The next administration should vigorously support the development and inclusion of science-based dietary guidelines for children from birth to 24 months (including during the mother’s pregnancy) in the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Federal nutrition programs
should be based on expert nutrition guidance. Children and their families deserve nutrition guidance that is free of political and industry interference and based on sound science.

Address agriculture practices that lead to arsenic in food. Inorganic arsenic ingestion poses a public health threat to the American public, especially to children. Exposure to contaminants like arsenic has a disproportionate effect on children due to the rapid growth of their developing bodies and minds. USDA should advance efforts to reduce arsenic uptake by food crops, especially foods targeted towards children, such as infant rice cereal, in order to reduce this risk.

Recommended Congressional Actions

Reauthorize essential child nutrition legislation and oppose efforts to weaken child nutrition programs. Congress must pass bipartisan child nutrition reauthorization legislation that keeps child nutrition programs strong and science-based and improves their reach. Successful, cost-effective federal nutrition programs play a critical role in reducing child poverty and helping children access healthy foods—while also improving their overall health, development, and school achievement. Congress should oppose legislation currently under consideration that would significantly weaken the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) by substantially reducing the number of high-poverty schools that are eligible to implement community eligibility and hampering access to free or reduced-price school meals. Science-based nutrition standards for school meals that have resulted in greater consumption of fruits and vegetables and whole grains and foods lower in sodium should be maintained.

Protect and strengthen SNAP. Congress must act to improve SNAP by increasing benefit levels to align with the Low-Cost Food Budget to help families stave off food insecurity for the full month. It should also lift the cap on the shelter deduction so the program can take into consideration the needs of families with high housing costs.

Oppose block grants and program “streamlining” that reduces eligibility and participation. Congress must reject changes to federal nutrition programs in the form of block grants and program “streamlining” or “consolidation,” which are designed to restrict or cap eligibility and reduce participation and access. Eligibility rules and funding structures of the current federal nutrition programs (such as SNAP), which make benefits available to children in almost all families with little income and few resources, are critical to their success.

Funding Priorities

SNAP and child nutrition entitlements. Congress must strengthen these programs and fund their improvements. High-priority examples include improving the adequacy of SNAP benefits and improving the reach of summer food programs. Children need optimal nutrition year-round. Increased reach of summer feeding programs will make it easier for children to access meals and help parents stretch their food dollars at home during the summer months.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. WIC is a targeted intervention for mothers and young children that fights food insecurity and promotes nutrition in early childhood, which is a critical time period of rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. WIC improves birth outcomes and the health of infants, supports breastfeeding mothers through education and peer support, and connects families to medical care. WIC funding must be maintained and expanded to ensure all families in need have access to this essential program.

WIC breastfeeding peer counseling. WIC has played an important role in promoting breastfeeding and improving breastfeeding initiation. There are, however, further improvements needed in order to support the continuation of breastfeeding through at least the first year of life. Expanded funding for the WIC breastfeeding peer counseling program will ensure that the program has a greater geographic reach and improve support for WIC participants to reach pediatric recommendations and national targets for breastfeeding.

About this Document

This document is an excerpt from Blueprint for Children: How the Next President Can Build a Foundation for a Healthy Future (http://aap.org/blueprint), which was produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics in September 2016 and has also been endorsed by the following organizations: the Academic Pediatric Association, the American Pediatric Society, America's Promise Alliance, the Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs, Family Voices, the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, the Pediatric Policy Council, the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, the Society for Pediatric Research and ZERO TO THREE.