

America's Child Hunger Crisis: Examining the Urgent Need for Federal Action
House Committee on Education & Labor
Virtual Member Briefing

Wednesday, September 23, 2020

Remarks by
Angela Richey, MPH, RD, SNS
Nutrition Services Director
Roseville Area and St. Anthony/New Brighton Schools

Chairman Scott, committee members, I am honored to address you today and thank you for your efforts to support child nutrition programs during this pandemic.

My name is Angela Richey, and I am the Nutrition Services Director at Roseville Area and St. Anthony/New Brighton Schools in Minnesota, serving nearly 10,000 students in 18 schools. I am a Registered Dietitian and member of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the School Nutrition Association.

My school nutrition programs, provide healthy meals that fuel student success, combat child hunger, and boost our local economy by employing community members and supporting local farmers.

Unfortunately, our programs have faced critical challenges due to COVID-19, substantial declines in the number of meals served and crippling revenue losses that threaten our ability to meet students' nutritional needs in the future. You should know how important the child nutrition waivers have been to our programs, and we are thankful to see they are included in the Continuing Resolution. We are hopeful that the House will include this essential provision to support this nutrition safety net for children.

On Friday, March 16th our world changed. In just two days, my school nutrition team reinvented our meal service model. We packed up meals and served students through drive-through pick-ups, bus stops, and home deliveries. I am so impressed by my staff's positive attitudes, creative critical thinking, and commitment to ensure none of our kiddos go hungry.

During the pandemic, my staff has faced tremendous hurdles from evolving workplace safety procedures to supply chain disruptions, and uncertainty around waiver extensions.

In St. Anthony/New Brighton, where 22% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, our program suddenly lost all a la carte revenue and participation from paid students. Despite a tripling of the county's unemployment rate, we struggle to combat the stigma associated with school meals. Pre-COVID, we served 850 lunches per day, but now we are lucky to serve 200. Given the loss in revenue, I had to furlough 40% of my staff.

In Roseville, 48% of my students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Typically, I serve over 5,200 lunches per day, but during the pandemic my participation rate dropped to less than 3,200.

One big challenge to participation is language barriers, as 33% of Roseville's students speak languages other than English at home. Through targeted outreach we are working to inform these families about site pick-ups and home delivery of meals, but we are especially concerned given the reported increases in child food insecurity among these communities.

COVID-19 has made serving school meals extraordinarily difficult. My team is preparing and distributing meal boxes for pick-up and delivery to full-time distance learners, serving students attending school on a hybrid schedule and offering meals for those students to take home for remote learning days. Despite our attempts, we are still seeing lower than average participation.

The drop in participation and revenue has impacted our budget and how we can serve students in the future. During school closures, my district kept our staff whole through the end of the school year, but we lost about \$350,000—my entire fund balance. I had to cut summer staff hours and, despite furloughs this fall, we still anticipate a deficit due to low participation and increased food, supply, and labor cost.

Our fund balance, critical for equipment purchases and salary adjustments, is gone. We planned to invest in culinary training and recipe development and hoped to purchase real trays to eliminate single use items. Those plans are on hold. Meanwhile, due to declining participation and alternative service models, we cannot honor purchasing commitments with our local farmers, who typically supply our locally grown produce and meats,

If the House includes this provision, and we can boost meal participation, we may come in budget neutral by the end of the year. But if waivers expire, we anticipate permanent layoffs, fewer meal pick-up sites, and an even fewer students receiving healthy meals.

The waivers are critical to ensuring we can serve our students in any setting. Operating under the Summer Food Service Program with the Area Eligibility waiver helps speed up meal service, reducing the risk of COVID exposure, while ensuring all our students have access to meals without stigma. With so many challenges facing our team this year, it would be impossible to enroll all eligible families in the free and reduced-price meal program.

School nutrition programs are critical to student achievement and lifelong healthy eating habits. But given this financial crisis, these programs will be forced to lay off employees and limit student services.

To ensure students are nourished, we need all waivers immediately extended through the end of the school year. We need this flexibility, the ability to plan for the spring, and, most

importantly, the assurance that during this national emergency, we can feed all our hungry students.

In addition, we require emergency relief funds to mitigate devastating losses from pandemic disruptions. Congress has helped numerous other industries. What is more important to invest in than the health of our country's children?

Thank you again Chairman Scott and all the committee members.