

TESTIMONY OF
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DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY
FOOD, NUTRITION AND CONSUMER SERVICES
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING
MARCH 5, 2008

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I am Kate Houston, Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). It is a great pleasure for me to join you this morning to discuss the Federal efforts to provide nutrition support for elderly people in need.

USDA's Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services is responsible for administering 15 Federal nutrition programs, which serve as the Nation's first line of defense against hunger and reach one in five Americans every year. The Bush Administration continues to demonstrate strong commitment to nutrition programs. Since 2001, funding for nutrition programs increased more than 75 percent to \$60.1 billion in fiscal year 2008, and now accounts for over half of USDA's annual budget.

I want to underscore the Administration's commitment to ensure all eligible people know about and have access to the food and nutrition benefits of the programs we

manage. Under Secretary Nancy Montanez Johner makes outreach to seniors her highest priority, and she and I actively participate in many national and regional events to target seniors, and other underserved and disadvantaged groups.

I would like to describe the wide range of activities USDA conducts to raise awareness and promote program participation for older Americans in need, and to promote healthy eating among this growing segment of our population. First, I want to provide broader context for USDA programs as part of the Federal safety net for our Nation's seniors.

As Deputy Assistant Secretary Walker's testimony makes clear, the Federal government has a diverse range of programs designed to provide access to nutritious food for seniors in need. All individuals over age 60 are eligible for both congregate and home-delivered nutrition assistance provided by one of 655 Area Agencies on Aging, which are funded through the HHS's Administration on Aging. USDA works with AoA to provide some commodity support to these programs. USDA also provides meals to seniors at adult day care centers through the Child and Adult Care Food Program. In addition, individuals of all ages have access to The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) at our nation's food banks and other local agencies.

The bulk of USDA's nutrition support for the elderly is provided through the Food Stamp Program, which serves over two million low-income seniors every month, providing \$1.9 billion in food benefits to seniors every year – increasing their food purchasing power for foods meeting their individual needs and preferences. The average monthly benefit for a food stamp participant over age 60 who lives alone is \$74 – far more than the \$10 per month minimum benefit commonly perceived by many. In fact,

about as many senior participants receive the maximum food stamp benefit for their household size as receive the minimum.

In addition to the significant food benefits provided through the major programs, USDA is working hard to encourage health-promoting practices by seniors. A healthy life in our senior years is not only about having enough to eat; it requires making the right food and lifestyle choices to be able to stay healthy and active.

For example, we developed, and expect to release later this year, “Eat Smart, Live Strong: Nutrition Education for Older Adults,” designed to increase fruit and vegetable consumption and physical activity among seniors participating in or eligible for FNS nutrition programs. Eat Smart, Live Strong uses a variety of incremental, educational approaches to promote two key behaviors: (1) increase fruit and vegetable consumption to three and a half cups per day, and (2) participate in at least thirty minutes of physical activity most days of the week.

FNS also encourages seniors to make fruits and vegetables an important part of their diets through the Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program. The program operates in thirty-eight States, the District of Columbia, six federally recognized Indian tribal governments, and Puerto Rico. The program provides coupons for seniors to buy fruits and vegetables at local farmers markets.

Mr. Chairman, while our programs are effective in helping low-income people attain a healthier diet, one of our most important goals, and also one of our greatest challenges, is reaching more eligible seniors with the benefits they need. In recent years, thanks in part to FNS outreach, we have seen strong growth in the overall rate of food stamp participation. From 2001 to 2005, the participation rate among eligible persons

increased from 54 to 65 percent. However, eligible individuals, those aged 60 or more, remain seriously under-served. The participation rate for elderly people is substantially lower, and has grown more slowly, than other eligible groups. In 2005, the participation rate for seniors was 31 percent compared to 60 percent for non-elderly adults, and 88 percent for children.

Facilitating access to nutrition assistance programs by seniors is a top priority for the Under Secretary and me. By using existing channels and trusted community partners to deliver outreach information, we can provide additional food assistance to isolated and needy seniors.

FNS works successfully with States and community and faith-based organizations to implement outreach activities, with nearly 800 activities in fiscal year 2007, including many to improve services to seniors.

For example, Under Secretary Johner and I had the privilege recently of visiting the Little Havana Nutrition and Activity Center in Miami, Florida. The service the dedicated staff provides to seniors is worthy of praise and admiration. At the center, seniors danced to live music, walked on treadmills, played dominos, participated in group exercises designed to improve their fine motor skills and ate healthy, culturally appealing meals in the large dining facility. Not only did the seniors enjoy a healthy lunch, but those deemed most in need were given a meal to eat once they left the center. We were very pleased to learn that the Center has a full time staff of outreach workers who meet with seniors on an individual basis and help them initiate their Food Stamp Program application process.

In addition to focusing our efforts on improving access to our nutrition assistance programs, low-income seniors often have special needs and face unique challenges to make use of nutrition program benefits. USDA is focused on several critical ways to identify and respond to seniors' needs and perspectives.

Under Secretary Johner recently hosted a roundtable discussion with local, state and federal agencies to identify the best actions to take to improve Food Stamp Access to seniors in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Senior Adult Day Care Centers have grown in prominence in South Texas within the last few years. Although seniors are provided with a nutritious lunch on weekdays, many of them do not eat during the weekends that the centers are closed. A survey found that a majority of the seniors were ill informed about the amount of benefits available to them and the application process. This roundtable discussion gave us insight into the need to provide seniors in these locations with the information to assist them in applying for the Food Stamp Program.

We also have found that many seniors are reluctant to take part in the Food Stamp Program because they may have identified food stamps with “welfare” or may resist help from the government. Seniors also may not understand the entitlement nature of the program and worry that by accepting food stamps they are taking benefits away from children and families. In the past, the stigma associated with food coupons may account, in part, for why our more discrete commodity programs have had more of a following among seniors in spite of limited, “one size fits all” food items. I am pleased to report that with the elimination of paper coupons, food stamp debit cards have enabled seniors, and all other recipients, to privately and discretely use their benefits to shop at grocery stores.

With regard to the special needs of homebound or isolated seniors, Food Stamp Programs regulations and policy provide for a wide range of options to meet their needs. Community-based organizations may assist them informally in the application process by getting applications, helping to fill them out, helping collect verification documents, and mailing or delivering the application to the State agency. Alternatively, homebound people may formally appoint another person to serve as their authorized representative to act on their behalf. Any person who faces a hardship in getting to the office for a face-to-face interview is entitled to a telephone or in-home interview instead. A homebound person may also designate an authorized representative to make food stamp purchases on their behalf; a separate card is issued to the authorized representative, sometimes called a secondary card holder, to use on behalf of the client.

Over the last several years, FNCS funded a number of pilot projects, participation grants, and outreach grants to encourage food stamp participation among the elderly population. Our efforts have been successful, as they provide information and raise awareness about program eligibility, test program simplifications to make it easier to apply, and test changes in the nature of the benefit to make the program more appealing to elderly clients.

Also over the last several years, the Department has expanded the number of States with Combined Application Projects (CAPs). These projects simplify the application process for elderly and disabled individuals that receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI). By using SSI income information, simple Food Stamp Program applications, that require minimal information, are used to provide these individuals with standardized benefits.

To date, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Kentucky, and Washington have implemented CAPs. New Jersey, Wisconsin, Arizona and South Dakota have been approved to operate projects and plan to implement soon. FNS is working with West Virginia and to get their CAP proposal approved. Five additional States are expected to submit CAP plans: Michigan, Idaho, Maryland, New Mexico, Rhode Island and Utah. In aggregate, these projects have added tens of thousands of new participants to the Food Stamp Program.

USDA utilizes best practices and positive examples to generate ideas, creativity, and enthusiasm for food stamp outreach and avoid “reinventing the wheel.” Mr. Chairman, I brought handouts with me today to describe a few of the promising practices we collected from across the country.

The FNS food stamp web site provides connections to the outreach ideas and other important materials and resources, including those focused on seniors.

FNS also conducts targeted outreach to seniors at the national level and supports related efforts at the regional, State, and local levels. The agency uses radio advertising to spread the word about the nutrition benefits of food stamps and help dispel myths. The advertising portfolio includes spots aimed directly at older individuals which air on stations with large senior audiences. Our national outreach efforts also include the “Step 1” pre-screening tool, a photo gallery of copyright-free images, educational materials in nearly 3 dozen languages, posters, flyers, and brochures, television and radio public service announcements; and tool kits with step-by-step guidance on outreach strategies

and partnership development. FNS provides training and technical assistance to State agencies and encourages State outreach plans to include strategies targeted to seniors.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman, as we age, our needs and our financial circumstances change. Living on a fixed income is never easy, and certainly not when one is coping with limited mobility, dietary restrictions, chronic medical conditions, or other challenges that younger people may not have. Many of our nation's seniors may be isolated from their families, live in unsafe neighborhoods, and may experience difficulty getting to the grocery store. Some may not speak English or understand how or where to go for help. We know that in spite of these challenges, our nation's seniors want to care for themselves, remain independent, and maintain good health well into old age.

At USDA, we recognize the contribution our nutrition programs can make for a person's health and wellbeing. We are committed to reaching out to all low-income Americans—from pregnant moms and infants to senior citizens—because we know good nutrition pays off well into a person's future.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the work this Committee is doing to focus our nation's attention on critical issues facing our senior population. The caring staff at USDA reaffirms our commitment to the pursuit of new ways to work with Congress, the States, our communities, and our advocacy partners to reach our elderly population.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to share the work of USDA with you today. I look forward to answering questions from you and other Members of the Committee.