NACo Human Services and Education Steering Committee

**Proposed Resolution to Guarantee Access to Federal Child Nutrition Programs**

**Issue:**

Current federal child nutrition programs do not adequately meet the needs of children experiencing food insecurity, which negatively impacts their learning, physical health and overall wellbeing.

**Proposed Policy:**

To remove administrative and resource barriers that block children in accessing the nutrition they need to thrive, NACo urges Congress to pass legislation that would guarantee all children have access to breakfast, lunch and snacks at school, in childcare and during the summer months at no cost. Congress must ensure that Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and participating childcare providers receive adequate funding and reimbursement to implement this program and meet rigorous nutrition standards. We encourage Congress to additionally promoting partnerships with local agricultural producers to incorporate healthy ingredients into school meals.

**Background:**

Some 30 million children participate in the National School Lunch program and 15 million participate in the National School Breakfast Program. However, data suggests that food insecurity remained pervasive in households with children in the US even before the economic crisis initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Federal child nutrition programs suffer from significant gaps that limit access among low-income children during the school year and the summer.

Schools and LEAs may only provide free meals to all enrolled students if they have opted into the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which requires at least 40% of students in each school to be categorically eligible for free meals based on participation in other means tested programs. At non-CEP schools, students must apply for the program, which can pose a formidable administrative barrier. Additionally, even the “reduced-price” rate represents a significant strain on resources that low-income children cannot always meet, as the widespread problem of accumulated “school lunch debt” illustrates. Meanwhile, during the summer, just 17 percent of children who participate in free/reduced price meal programs access nutrition through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sites, an issue that is especially pronounced in rural communities. Finally, while 3.6 million children receive meals in childcare and other settings through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the reimbursement rate for providers remains prohibitively low, particularly for family childcare providers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated an issue that has been growing in our nation: children going to school and childcare each day hungry and unable to properly learn, develop and play. Restrictive eligibility requirements, administrative barriers and lack of access in the summer means that families struggling to pay basic expenses are deemed ineligible to receive assistance. Kids are further reluctant to identify themselves as in need for fear of stigma and school meal shaming, while schools and LEAs struggle with increased meal debts due to student’s inability to pay and insufficient support from federal partners. Research shows that children with access to consistent, healthy meals have shown increased school performance, better attendance rates and have improved health outcomes. Addressing these critical needs benefits our students, families, teachers and schools.

While county governments are not always responsible for funding local school districts and corresponding nutrition programs, we play a significant role in serving the same population of children and support increased federal investment in programs that improve child development, strengthen intersecting systems of support for vulnerable populations and relieve financial pressure on state and local governments.

**Fiscal/Urban/Rural Impact:**

Would impact child academic and health wellbeing in both urban and rural areas both during the school year and over the summer months. Increasing the rate of reimbursement for school meals to allow Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to lessen/eliminate school debt of unpaid meals. Additionally, this resolution would also address economic benefit of promoting utilization of local agricultural areas to provide fresh healthy ingredients to be incorporated into school meals.

**Sponsor:** Councilmember Craig Rice, Vice-Chair NACo Human Services and Education Steering Committee, Montgomery County MD