

Statement of Kevin Concannon, Under Secretary

Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services

before the

National Council on Disability

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Council, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I'm pleased to be here to discuss the role that the Federal nutrition assistance programs play in meeting the needs of people with disabilities. Like many other social service programs, USDA's 15 nutrition assistance programs serve a wide variety of people, many facing multiple challenges, including physical and mental disabilities. Because of the diverse needs of the citizens that rely on them, it is essential for those who consider changes to such programs to understand their multiple roles, and to ensure that any changes do not undermine their positive impacts in reducing and preventing hunger and improving nutrition.

As Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, I am responsible for the administration of Federal nutrition assistance programs, which work both individually and in concert with one another to reduce and prevent hunger and improve the diets of children and low-income households. While about 1 in 4 Americans currently participate, these programs are a critical safety net for every American, designed to ensure that, whatever other challenges they face due to economic disruption, natural disaster, or personal challenges such as disease and disability, they need not experience food insecurity and hunger.

We see the vital importance of these programs today. Even as signs emerge that the economy is beginning to return to vigor, families across the country continue to struggle with

the aftermath of three years of recession. Unemployment has fallen substantially since October 2009, but remained unacceptably high at 9 percent as of April. Census Bureau figures shows that the poverty rate in 2009 was 14.3 percent, the highest rate since 1994. There were 43.6 million people in poverty in 2009 — the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates are available.

And demand for the nutrition assistance programs remains extremely high. In February 2011, 44.2 million people received SNAP benefits, about half of them children.

Participation in the school meals programs remains at near-record levels, with about 32 million children receiving a meal through the school lunch program on an average school day, and two out of three served free or at reduced price.

These sobering statistics underscore the fact that the nutrition assistance programs have never been more important to our Nation. The President's fiscal year 2012 Budget Request for these programs reflects this critical importance. USDA is not immune to the fiscal challenges currently facing America, and our budget reflects a number of difficult sacrifices in order to maintain our Country's fiscal health. But it also reflects important core values and preserves key investments that make a difference in the lives of the American people, and so preserves our strong commitment to a robust nutrition safety net that protects our people against hunger. The budget provides full support for the major nutrition assistance programs, to ensure access to benefits for all eligible people who apply. And it makes targeted investments to improve their reach and their performance, including maintenance of Recovery Act SNAP benefit increases through March 2014, support for schools to improve meals through the Healthier US School Challenge, strategies to help States improve SNAP customer service and process

applications promptly, and expansion of the School Breakfast Program. As a country, we cannot compete and win the future if our people are hungry, our children are poorly nourished, or new mothers and newborn infants do not have what they need for a healthy start. The Administration recognizes and supports these fundamental facts.

Let me turn now to the specific role that these programs play in supporting and empowering people with disabilities. While none of the nutrition assistance programs are designed to be focused or limited to participation by people with disabilities, they are relied upon by such individuals, and they are an important part of our client population. In SNAP, our largest program, the most recent data show that in 2009, 3.2 million participating households, about 21 percent of all SNAP households, included at least one person with a disability. The participation rate for these households is about the same as for the general eligible population — about two in three of those eligible participate in the program. This illustrates the fact that for people with disabilities as for others, many people are not participating who could benefit from SNAP. We continue to aggressively pursue outreach and information strategies to get the word out to these people about the program's benefits,

On average, SNAP households that include people with disabilities have incomes well below the SNAP eligibility requirement — about 80 percent of the poverty line — despite the fact that more than 9 percent of them also have earnings. They get about \$100 in benefits per person per month from the program — critical support for such low-income households. While about three-quarters receive Supplemental Security Income and about half get Social Security, fewer than one in ten get TANF benefits, and fewer than

one in twenty get General Assistance. These participants, like others that use SNAP, rely on its benefits to ensure that they can 'get the food they need to support good health. Data show that SNAP participation increases the amount of nutritious food available to participating households.

SNAP eligibility criteria for people with disabilities is more generous than for the general population. The resource limit is higher, for example, and there is no gross income limit, although the net income requirement does apply. In addition, USDA has made administrative options and waivers available to States that simplifies the application process for people with disabilities. State options include broad-based categorical eligibility, which eases resource requirements and helps people with disabilities who have modest assets and high expenses to participate in the program. In addition, States may assign households in which all members have disabilities and with no earned income either a 12 or 24 month certification period which reduces the paperwork burden on participants whose financial circumstances are very stable. In addition, telephone interviews are available in lieu of face to face interviews.

A waiver to allow postponement of the interview for households eligible for expedited service at the time of application can help households with very limited income that have members with disabilities access their benefits more quickly. Combined Application Projects make it easier for elderly SSI recipients with disabilities to receive SNAP benefits by reengineering the application process and eliminating the need to visit a local SNAP office. The combination of standardized benefits, minimal need for independent verification, and no need to visit the local office, facilitates enrollment for

the target population.

Finally, people with disabilities who find it difficult to get to the local office may designate an authorized representative to complete their application on their behalf. Likewise, they may designate an authorized representative to redeem their benefits at the store on their behalf. USDA is committed to working with our State partners to create barrier-free access to SNAP benefits for people with disabilities.

For the school meal programs, school districts must make meal accommodations on a case-by-case basis for children whose disabilities prevent them from consuming the typical school lunch. They do this by working closely with the disabled child's parents and physician.

We do not have data on the prevalence of disabilities among those who participate in the school meal programs. However, these programs operate in nearly all public schools (and many private schools) across the country, and the data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that about 13 percent of all students enrolled in public schools have some form of disability. Like SNAP clients, school meal participants, including those with disabilities, rely on the program to provide nutritious meals that support good health and educational achievement.

Regarding the WIC program, applicants with disabilities are not required to physically come to the WIC clinic to be certified for WIC benefits and an authorized representative can redeem their benefits at the store on their behalf. In addition, to meet the special nutritional needs of participations with conditions that preclude or restrict the use of conventional foods, WIC offers exempt infant formula or certain medical foods. In some

States, the medical foods or exempt infant formula products are delivered directly to the participant's home.

Evidence continues to mount that the nutrition assistance programs have multiple, positive impacts, especially in times of economic hardship:

- Program data indicate that in 2009, SNAP benefits added to other income sources was sufficient to raise 13.4 percent of SNAP households — over 4.4 million people — above the poverty line.
- The Department's annual tracking of the rate of food insecurity in the United States showed that this rate was essentially unchanged between 2008 and 2009, with 14.7 percent of households experiencing food insecurity in 2009. Similarly, data released recently by the Food Research and Action Center on food hardship showed relative stability during 2010. While continued high levels of food insecurity and food hardship are cause for concern, the fact that the numbers did not increase, despite the significant increase in unemployment and poverty, strongly suggests that that these programs are working as intended — to meet the needs of families in financial crisis.

We come together at a time when substantial and significant changes are being considered to many Federal programs, including nutrition assistance programs. It is important to recognize that such changes can have both intended and unintended consequences, and that careful analysis must be done to assess the impact of any changes on their effectiveness before major changes are made.

One of the most important aspects of SNAP and the school meal programs is that they are structured to respond automatically to the needs of the hardest-hit households, based on national eligibility standards. Benefits flow to these communities as economic conditions worsen, providing a boost of stimulus even as they meet the nutrition needs of low-income people. I raise this in part to underscore that while this flexible, responsive program structure leads the program to expand when need is greatest, it also causes program participation, and expenditures, to contract as conditions improve and needs lessen. This efficient and effective aspect of these programs is one of the keys to their success.

We see this dynamic at work in SNAP. When the economy takes a downturn, more families struggle, and more families look to SNAP for help. When that happens, we increase our investment in this program to make sure that families do not go hungry. The opposite is also true though. As the economy improves, and more Americans find jobs, fewer families struggle, and fewer families need the program in the first place. When that happens, our investment tends to decrease.

In fact, that is exactly the story that our estimates tell. Over the next 10 years, as the economy continues to improve, spending on SNAP is projected to decrease by roughly 22 percent. I mention this because I think it is refreshing to know that in a time when so many folks up here on Capitol Hill and in the public are concerned about runaway spending, that we have a program with spending levels that are already projected to decrease if we just continue to focus on the economy and putting America back to work.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to join you today, and look forward to working with you to ensure that the nutrition assistance programs are as supportive and responsive as they can be to people with disabilities. I would be happy to take any questions.