



Fulfilling the President's Call:
A Partnership with States to End Child Hunger in America by 2015

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Introduction

During the campaign, then-candidate Obama excited anti-hunger activists by committing to end child hunger by 2015. Understandably, the plan for how to accomplish that goal has not been fully sketched out. The key questions are what the practical strategy should be to achieve this vision, and how to find resources to accomplish such an ambitious goal in a future of tight federal budgets.

There is no substitute for a strong role for the federal government in ending childhood hunger. But there is also an indispensable complementary role at the state level. Critical programs ranging from food stamps to child nutrition must be adequately funded at the federal level but also executed more effectively by the states.

Most of America's hungry children are hungry not because we lack food, or even because we lack public food and nutrition programs. They are hungry because they lack access to anti-hunger programs that we know work and we know can be made to work even better for our young people.

This proposal urges the Administration to embrace a stronger partnership with states to ensure they have the strategic resources they need to close the gap between children who are eligible for assistance and those who are actual receive it.

There are enormous resources available, but they are too underutilized to help hungry children. A smart focus on leveraging those existing resources, and on using state, private sector, and nonprofit local partners to help lead and implement a local plan, makes the most sense.

We suggest that a relatively small outlay of federal funds could incentivize states to set aside the necessary resources to take on the mission of ending child hunger in their state in a short time.² Even

¹ The authors would like to thank Pat Nicklin, Carol Watson and Josh Wachs of Share Our Strength and also Joel Berg, who coauthored with Tom Freedman a plan to end child hunger by 2012 (published by the Democratic Leadership Council).

² This proposal supports the Statement of Principles issued by the Child Nutrition Forum regarding the 2009 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization legislation. It has been designed not to replace reauthorization of these vital programs, but to augment them by helping states build upon and leverage existing resources.

without this support, the state of Maryland, with the help of Share our Strength and others,³ has committed to this ambition, and other states and the District of Columbia have committed to the general goal. While ultimately ending hunger in the United States will require large new resources, the first step, and the most cost-effective, could be taken promptly, modestly, and with great impact.

This proposal is divided into four parts. In Section I, we describe the scope of the problem. In Section II, we outline a state-based approach to solve it. In Section III, we briefly describe how Maryland has already begun using a similar plan and achieved some notable success. Finally, in Section IV, we describe the costs of implementing state-based plans nationwide and argue that a smart plan will ultimately produce savings due to health and educational benefits.

I. Background

In the United States, 12.4 million children are at risk of hunger—that's one in six. And that number is growing, as is the prevalence of diabetes, obesity, and other health conditions among children, particularly those residing in low-income communities. We know that children who do not consume nutritious food are more likely to be undernourished and overweight. Federal nutrition programs already exist to help ensure that children have access to a nutritious meal and do not go to bed hungry. These include SNAP (Food Stamps), school breakfast and lunch, CACFP for after-school and daycare meals, the Summer Food Service program, and WIC. However, these programs are underutilized and there are often barriers for families to access them. For example, only two-thirds of eligible people receive Food Stamp benefits. In terms of the free and reduced price school breakfast program, only 45.3 children participated in the program for every 100 children that participated in the free and reduced price lunch program in 2006-2007. For the summer nutrition program, only 17.5 children participated for every 100 children that participated in the free and reduced price lunch program in 2006-2007.⁴ There is an opportunity to close these gaps by addressing the barriers that prevent children and their families from accessing these programs.

What is missing is an on-the-ground, state-specific approach that connects children to the nutritious food they need where they live, learn, and play.

II. A Federal State Partnership to End Childhood Hunger by 2015

State-led partnerships comprised of leaders from the public and private sectors are the most efficient way to end child hunger. These partnerships would work to identify and address barriers that prevent children from accessing existing food and nutrition programs. Specifically, each collaborative would develop detailed, measurable, and time-specific plans to end childhood hunger in their state. In order for the United States to meet its pledge to end childhood hunger by 2015, we must build the capacity of states to develop and implement measurable plans to bring about improvements in three important areas: access to existing food and nutrition programs for children and families; building community infrastructure for getting nutritious food to children; and provision and support of nutrition education for families that need it most. To do this, the federal government could adopt the following plan.

³ Share our Strength has helped begin campaigns in the District of Columbia, Florida, Washington, and Maryland. In 2006, the Democratic Leadership Council published a policy paper laying out a general federal strategy to end child hunger by 2012.

⁴ Source: Food Research and Action Center, State of the States, 2008.

a. Create a State Incentive Fund: The purpose of this fund would be to provide grants to states to help them develop and launch detailed plans to end childhood hunger. Priority would be given to states that can demonstrate: 1) a high prevalence of child food insecurity; 2) a lead governmental agency with the interest, expertise, and authority to influence the implementation of child food and nutrition programs; 3) proven private sector engagement in hunger reduction activities; and 4) a history of collaboration with community-based organizations that provide food and nutrition-related services to children and families residing in low-income communities.

A state-based approach is being used in the District of Columbia, Florida, Maryland, and Washington State, where there has already been an increase in the number of low-income children and families that utilize existing federal food and nutrition programs.

The lead entity in implementing these plans could be mayors offices, non-profits, or a new legislatively-created entity. The execution strategy could include technical assistance and guidance about:

- Educating state leaders about how to better utilize existing federal food and nutrition programs and how to engage the private sector to leverage those resources
- Forming effective state coalitions that include program administrators as well as other stakeholders from the public and private sectors—including the faith-based community
- Assessing/mapping areas of need and program gaps
- Identifying opportunities for impact; translating the needs analysis into a community-specific, measurable plan of action that includes detailed strategies for increasing a child’s access to existing federal food and nutrition programs
- Building the capacity of relevant agencies and community-based organizations to implement their state plans and to support innovative local strategies
- Implementing the state plans in a way that will lead to short-term and long-term results
- Learning from other states about best practices and promising strategies

b. Identify a Federal Agency to Oversee Accountability and Evaluation: Although each state would have a state agency that oversees the creation and implementation of its plan, the federal government could identify a federal agency (most likely the U.S. Department of Agriculture) that has the expertise and capacity to monitor, collect data, and evaluate state-based efforts.

c. National Accountability: One goal would be to credit states that make progress, and hold accountable states that fail to take on this challenge. An option for the new Administration would be publish annually a report on progress against child hunger, noting states that are engaged in the battle to end child hunger and how different states are faring in reducing child hunger.

IV. The Maryland Example

In Maryland, Governor Martin O'Malley directed the Maryland Office for Children to end childhood hunger by 2015. The Office for Children is partnering with a national anti-hunger organization – Share Our Strength – and, together, they educated the state's Children's Cabinet about childhood hunger and have created a public-private collaborative consisting of the State Department of Education, the Department of Human Resources, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, state advocacy organizations, food banks, private businesses, the faith-based community, and others. The collaborative worked together to identify needs across the state and to develop a plan for addressing those needs. Since officially launching the plan in November 2008, they have already increased the participation of low-income children and families in school breakfast, child and adult care food programs, and Food Stamps, with plans to increase access to summer meals. For example, school breakfast participation has increased by 9% since November, with 146,000 students now participating in free or reduced-fee school breakfast programs around the state.

V. Projected Costs and Return on Investment

One approach would be to make available to states moderate resources to help them staff state initiatives, develop local public private networks, and institute pilot programs. The cost of helping states staff up would be relatively modest, possibly between \$750,000 and \$1 million per state to create and launch plans to end childhood hunger, depending on the size of the state and the prevalence of child food insecurity. Nationwide, this equates to \$37.5 million to \$50 million for states to create and launch plans, funds that could be made available as individual states agreed to participate and supplied plans for action. Another set of funds could be used to help build a national network of non-profit and private entities that could offer technical assistance, and help states build their own coalitions to address childhood hunger. Also, as an incentive for schools to pilot innovative strategies that have proven to be effective (i.e., Breakfast in the Classroom, Grab N Go breakfast, etc.), a plan could award \$5 million specifically to schools for their food and nutrition programs. Finally, a thorough evaluation system could cost less than \$3 million and measure and evaluate national efforts to end childhood hunger.

These costs are minimal when compared with the ultimate achievement of ending hunger among America's children. Not only would this be a signature moral achievement, but it likely is a cost-saver over time. Healthcare costs associated with poor nutrition are high, and there is a growing body of research that shows a correlation between academic scores and access to food and nutrition.

The president made a bold commitment to end childhood hunger by 2015. The key to successfully reaching that goal is for federal leadership to start the process by encouraging states to take on this challenge. If we leverage existing resources, skills, and organizations, this ambitious goal can become a realistic plan and then a crowing achievement within less than a decade.

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