

A Healthier Future for Our Kids

By Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack

There are few things that should be more important to America than the health and well-being of our children. Yet an astounding 30 percent of them are overweight or obese, and last year, kids in more than 500,000 American families went without the food they needed. This means that many kids are not learning as well as they should in school because they can't concentrate or have self-esteem issues. In the long term, it threatens the safety and prosperity of our nation, as fewer 18-year-olds are fit for military service, fewer folks have the skills they need to compete in a global economy, and obese adults strain our health care system.

In December, President Obama took action to help us combat hunger and improve nutrition nationwide, signing into law the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. Together with the President and First Lady Michelle Obama, I have been fighting for this major victory for our kids since the earliest days of the administration. We were joined in support by many different organizations, including the Lutheran church and communities of faith from around the country. Since then, the First Lady has launched the *Let's Move!* initiative to help solve childhood obesity within a generation, and we have reaffirmed our commitment to ending childhood hunger in America by 2015.

The bill strengthens our safety net against hunger. It will increase the number of eligible children enrolled in the school meals programs by using Medicaid data to determine their eligibility. And in select high-poverty communities, we will eliminate paper applications altogether – freeing up school district resources and parent time, while ensuring that kids who face some of the highest barriers to success in life never go to school hungry. Finally – we know that hunger doesn't end when the school bell rings, and this legislation will provide more meals for at-risk children nationwide by reimbursing providers of after-school meals in all 50 states.

This bill also will help us make the first major changes in 30 years to serve healthier meals to America's youngsters. We will update the nutritional standards for school meals so that they include more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy – and less sodium, sugar and fat. We will provide additional funding to schools when they meet these standards. And to ensure

that these efforts are not undermined by foods from vending machines, a la carte lunch lines, and school stores, USDA will help make the healthy choice an easy choice for our kids by setting nutritional standards for all food sold in schools.

This landmark legislation would not have been possible without the incredible support it received from communities of faith all over the country. Affordable, healthy food for our children is a universal value to all systems of belief, and it was inspiring to see the way America's many faith communities came together to urge passage of this legislation. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson raised the legislation during a November meeting with President Obama and National Council of Churches leaders in Washington, DC. And congregations connected their communities to a national priority by calling and sending thousands of emails, postcards, and letters to their elected officials. On behalf of the President, I want to commend the ELCA, its member churches and Lutherans around the country for helping to create a brighter future for our nation's children.

Beyond advocating for this legislation, congregations and faith-based organizations play a vital role fighting hunger in our communities every day. ELCA World Hunger provides critical grants to community organizations fighting hunger. And individual congregations are actively involved in running food pantries, gleaning extra food, helping spread the word about USDA's nutrition assistance programs like SNAP (formerly food stamps), and serving meals to those in need. Congregations also play an important role in teaching kids and their parents about healthy eating.

We all want to raise a generation of healthy Americans ready to learn, innovate, prosper and lead our nation. Our nation will not succeed if our children are not learning because they are hungry, or are not achieving because they are unhealthy.

Thanks to the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, we will take important strides in improving school meals, combating hunger, and supporting families. And to ensure a healthier future for our children and our nation, we must all continue to work together – from the local to the national level – to build on this success. USDA looks forward to being an even better partner in our mutual efforts to respond to the call, “for I was hungry and you fed me.”