

**Testimony of Kim McCoy Wade
Executive Director
California Association of Food Banks
Sacramento, CA**

**Before the House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry
“The Federal Food Stamp Program
and its Impact on Children’s Nutrition and Health”**

10:00 AM

Tuesday, March 13, 2007

**1032 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC**

I’m Kim McCoy Wade, Executive Director of the California Association of Food Banks, and I represent 40 food banks united to build a well-nourished California. Our 40 community food banks partner with a network of 5,000 charities and congregations to serve over 2 million Californians in need of food.

Forty years ago in Texas, my mom graduated with a college degree in home economics and followed a call from President Johnson to enlist as a VISTA volunteer. She soon found herself living in Newark, New Jersey, where her new job was to teach moms how to use food stamps to shop and prepare healthy food for their families. Of course, as a VISTA volunteer, she also was living on food stamps herself, and found that first-hand experience more educational than anything she had learned in home economics. The women in her classes taught *her* how to stretch peanut butter into soups to last through the month.

In California, just as in Texas and New Jersey, food stamps are the ultimate, if unsung, nutrition program for children. Food stamps can serve every child, of every age, on every day of the year, school day or not. Because of food stamps’ creation 40 years ago, it’s rare to find a starving child in America – and for that accomplishment we can all be proud and protective. Two million people now receive food stamps in California each month, and 2 out of 3 are children. *Ninety percent* are families with children. These 1.3 million children, like all participants, receive around \$100 per month for their parents to spend on food at the grocery store. For states, this provides tremendous economic activity: more than \$2 billion is spent on food in California alone, generating \$3.7 billion in economic impact. For parents, it’s a simpler equation: food stamps prevent them from sending their children to bed hungry or off to school unprepared to learn.

While we can be proud that child starvation is largely a thing of the past in America, what is far too common still is children eating oatmeal every night for dinner because the money has just run out. Families everywhere are struggling to afford housing, health care, and all the basic costs of raising kids today. Often, the first place that gets squeezed is the family food budget. Many kids end up with oatmeal -- or other very low-cost, low-

quality foods – for dinner because the food stamps they receive do not go far enough. Healthy food is expensive, with fruits and vegetables costing more than more processed foods, according to research from Adam Drewnowski at the University of Washington. Food stamps' average benefit of \$1 per meal helps fill the plate, but isn't enough to truly nourish a child. One youth in Georgia, whose soccer team was recently featured on the front page of the New York Times, held his stomach and told his coach that he was hungry. When the coach said he could have a snack at home, he told her he couldn't because there was no food at home -- it was the end of the month when the food stamps run out. That story matches food bank survey data finding that food stamps tend to last only 2 ½ weeks of the month.

Even worse, there are millions of poor children who don't get *any* food from the Food Stamp Program, because of the bureaucratic hurdles in their way. Only half of all eligible families participate in food stamps in California (46%) – and even fewer of our eligible working families (36%). More and more, the typical family eligible for food stamps is not unemployed or relying solely upon public assistance. Instead, they are working families and they are having tremendous difficulty navigating the system on their own. Some of these families give up because of state and local barriers that we are working to overcome with outreach, innovation, and advocacy. Nationally, however, we need Congressional leadership to continue to focus on making food stamps really work for kids and parents. As one example, “categorical eligibility,” which has helped boost participation in our neighbor state of Oregon to 80%, should not be eliminated as a State option, as the President's budget proposed.

Why do the California food bank network and food banks around the country care so much about children and food stamps? Quite simply, because our mission is to end hunger in America, and we know we can't do it alone. The Food Stamp Program provides 8 times the amount of food that the charitable food network in America does, according to America's Second Harvest: the Nation's Food Bank Network. The new debit card system efficiently delivers benefits to families, which are then spent in the local grocery stores for foods that families choose to meet their health, cultural, and dietary needs. We especially need the Food Stamp Program to be strong, because when it is weak, families lean more on food banks and our tremendous network of charities, congregations, and volunteers. Food banks aim to promote and partner with the Food Stamp Program -- not replace it.

For all these reasons, food banks in California have taken the lead to connect families to food stamps through a partnership with USDA and the California Health and Human Services Agency. Our Association has contracted with 48 food banks and other community groups in 22 counties to target 135,000 people this year with information and assistance on food stamps. In communities across the state, food banks are taking a comprehensive approach to ending hunger that integrates three goals: providing healthy emergency food, especially California-grown fruits and vegetables; promoting nutrition education to encourage healthy food choices; and connecting people to food stamps so they are able to purchase the food they need. Statewide, we have also helped pilot a state hotline, on-line applications, and a web resource center, www.myfoodstamps.org. We

are determined to move California from its current last place ranking among the states for food stamp participation.

Our work on the front lines with children in need of food has shown us both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Food Stamp Program, and what's needed to deliver good nutrition to all children:

1. Enough money to buy healthy food all month long:

Families now receive *less* in food stamps than they did 10 years ago. The typical working family of 3 will receive over \$400 less this year – and that loss is growing with each passing year. That's a particularly discouraging number to food bankers. Assuming we provide a family with a box of food worth roughly \$35 each month, that's about the same as the \$400 lost annually from food stamps. That's not progress in reducing hunger, that's just passing the buck. This loss of food dollars is a direct result of a freeze in the food stamp standard deduction enacted in 1996. Over the next 10 years, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that California families on food stamps will receive *\$1.6 billion* less than they would have had the 1996 cut not been enacted. Our food banks can't and shouldn't have to try to fill that difference. This lost ground in the fight against hunger can be regained by Congress focusing first on restoring food stamp benefit levels.

An adequate monthly food budget, coupled with positive nutrition education, is what children and families need to get the healthy food they need. The minimum benefit of \$10 that many of our seniors receive needs to be increased, too (and California needs specific assistance to fix our unique rules prohibiting food stamps for seniors and disabled children and adults receiving SSI.)

2. Food for all people in need:

The Food Stamp Program used to ask only if you were poor and needed food -- and that's the right question. Now, there are different and complicated rules for immigrant families, unemployed adults without children, and certain ex-offenders. California is feeling the affects of this patchwork right now in our recent citrus freeze. Many newly unemployed farm workers are *not* turning to food stamps to help feed their children – either because they are not eligible or are confused about the different eligibility rules – and instead are coming to community food banks that now need additional freeze relief to meet the need. Currently, adult legal immigrants are generally not eligible for federal food stamps during their first five years in the country and then face complicated and intimidating rules after that period. All legal immigrants should be made eligible for the program. It's the right thing to do and it would have the added benefit of dramatically simplifying the program in California. Children in immigrant homes are hurt by program rules that feed some people in need, and not others.

A second group of people who can't get food is people with savings. Surely children need parents to be saving for a security deposit for an apartment, for their tuition, or for

the next rainy day when someone's sick or the car breaks down. But families can't get food stamps if they have more than \$2000 in the bank. Don't let family savings be a barrier to family nutrition: eliminate the asset test.

3. No red tape:

Only about 1/3 of food bank clients are receiving food stamps, though many more are likely eligible, according to America's Second Harvest. Through food banks' outreach to our clients, we have found that long waits, repetitive paperwork, and outdated finger-imaging requirements all prevent families from completing the application process. One California study documented that it takes an average of 2 trips to the food stamp office to successfully submit an application. Working families could particularly benefit from food stamps' power to boost their wages, but half don't apply because of red tape that means too much bureaucracy and not enough help. Partly as a result of this frustration, as many as half of the people food banks now serve are working families, according to several California food banks' 2006 Hunger Studies.

Even sophisticated outreach efforts will not achieve increased participation if not coupled with innovations that allow families to get food stamps in places outside the county welfare office – including on-line and at schools, medical centers, and food banks. The Electronic Benefit Transfer card that resulted from the 1996 farm bill was a great step to modernize the program. Congress should demonstrate similar ingenuity in this year's Farm Bill by continuing to invest in technology, combined applications, a new name, and other common-sense steps to simplify this process, while of course still preserving integrity.

Another essential part of the Food Stamp Program is Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE). At 14 food banks in California and throughout the country, FSNE projects are working to help low-income families achieve nutrition goals consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. By empowering children - and their parents - to make healthy choices, these programs can bring about positive lifestyle changes and especially increased fruit and vegetable consumption. But we can do more to unlock the potential of FSNE programs, to strengthen their ability to reduce hunger, and to help avoid costly health disparities such as obesity and type 2 diabetes. The Farm Bill provides an opportunity to modernize FSNE, to ensure state and local programs can utilize evidence-driven public health interventions that reach current and potentially-eligible food stamp recipients in multiple venues where they live, work, go to school, worship, and make their food and physical activity choices.

The Food Stamp Program isn't the only nutrition program that food banks directly work with. We also partner with USDA to distribute emergency food, through both the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). Alarming, these emergency food programs are now serving *fewer* people in California than in recent years, despite increased need and their benefit to both families and the agricultural sector. In California, TEFAP and bonus commodities are down from 97 million pounds in 2002 to 57 million pounds in 2006. CSFP, which serves

mainly seniors, cut 5,000 people last year in California and is again proposed for elimination in the President's budget. Both programs deserve significant, additional investment in food purchase to feed the people food banks serve every day.

Finally, I have one last message on children's health and nutrition: this year, you are going to be presented with a lot of appealing new ideas around nutrition. I am hopeful that there is the opportunity and the funding available to explore many of these proposals. However, I also urge you to keep focused on what is our largest and most successful US nutrition program, preventing severe hunger and boosting nutrition for millions of children nationwide: the Food Stamp Program. Twenty four million Americans count on food stamps today, and another 20 million in need are counting on us to make sure the program will also work for them.

There's a reason the National Journal recently ranked the Food Stamp Program as one of the top 10 American success stories. Children displaced by Katrina received food stamps. Teenagers with their growing appetites use food stamps. Infants -- like my one year old son, just trying fruits and vegetables for the first time -- participate in food stamps. All of these children are now relying on all of us adults to help them get the food they need to grow, learn, and thrive. Thank you for taking up that challenge.

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Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Information Required From Non-governmental Witnesses

House rules require non-governmental witnesses to provide their resume or biographical sketch prior to testifying. If you do not have a resume or biographical sketch available, please complete this form.

1. Name: Kim McCoy Wade
2. Business Address: 909 12th St #203
Sacramento CA 95814
3. Business Phone Number: 916-321-4435
4. Organization you represent: CA Association of Food Banks
5. Please list any occupational, employment, or work-related experience you have which add to your qualification to provide testimony before the Committee:
CA Association of Food Banks (2004-present);
Food Banks of Northern California (2001-2003);
Bread for the World (1999-2000); Children's
Defense Fund (1995-1998)
6. Please list any special training, education, or professional experience you have which add to your qualifications to provide testimony before the Committee:
NYU School of Law (1995, J.D.)
Carleton College (1991, B.A.)
7. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list the capacity in which you are representing that organization, including any offices or elected positions you hold:
Executive Director

PLEASE ATTACH THIS FORM OR YOUR BIOGRAPHY TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.

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Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2004.

Name: Kim McCoy Wade
Address: 909 12th St #203 Sacramento CA 95814
Telephone: 916-321-4435
Organization you represent (if any): CA Association of Food Banks

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do NOT require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: n/a Amount: _____
Source: _____ Amount: _____

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: USDA Food Stamp Outreach Amount: 04: \$23,468 ; 05: \$48,763 ; 06: \$1,153,234
Source: USDA Nutrition Education Amount: 04: \$166,057 ; 05: \$520,785 ; 06: \$550,087
USDA Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program 06: \$90,000

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: _____

Signature: Kim McCoy Wade

* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.