



For Immediate Release

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House Committee Advances Bill Jeopardizing Child Nutrition Programs

NETWORK, Faith-Based Organizations Demand Congress Protect Children in Need

WASHINGTON, May 19, 2016 – Yesterday, the House Education and Workforce Committee voted to advance the so-called Improving Child Nutrition and Education Act of 2016 (H.R. 5003). The bill, which passed almost exactly along party lines – only one Republican joined Democrat in opposing the measure – would make it significantly harder for low-income children to access food assistance programs, therefore rejecting our moral responsibility to care for children.

NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice joined a broad coalition of faith, nutrition, and education organizations in **opposing this legislation. NETWORK Lobby is calling on Congress to create a bipartisan solution and fix these significant problems before any further votes are considered.** Any child nutrition reauthorization legislation must ensure that all children have access to good, healthy food.

“It is distressing that House Republicans have chosen to support changes to our nation’s child nutrition programs that will take food away from children and widen the gaps in our society. They are doing this at a time when 1 in 5 children live at risk for hunger. This is wrong,” said **Sister Simone Campbell, the executive director of NETWORK.** “Investment in child nutrition programs is an investment in our future. We need to make it easier for schools, families and children to access nutrition assistance programs year-round, so kids can grow into healthy, successful adults. The bill passed by the House Education and Workforce Committee yesterday rolls back improvements from 2010 that we’ve seen working in communities across the country. It is wrong to undo successful programs. We should all be working towards a society in which no one, especially the youngest and most vulnerable among us, goes hungry.”

Of particular concern to NETWORK is the provision that restricts high poverty schools from participating in the Community Eligibility Program. This program was designed specifically to reduce bureaucracy and alleviate administrative burdens for schools, with the added benefit of expanding access to free meals and reducing the stigma of students who participate. Simply put, this program allows schools to provide meals at no charge to all students if 40% of the student body is automatically eligible. The bill passed yesterday raises the threshold to 60% of the student body. This means that 7,000 schools that have been providing free meals to 3.4 million children will no longer be eligible to serve all students. In addition, this eliminates the opportunity for an additional 11,000 schools to enroll in the Community Eligibility Program.

The committee also passed more stringent verification standards for free and reduced price meal applications, causing eligible students to inadvertently lose access to school meals. This will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable families and will force schools that already struggle for time and resources to expend more effort proving that their students indeed need nutritional assistance.

These provisions are hardly the only indicators of the partisan motive to weaken programs that feed hungry children. The House Committee passed a provision replacing critical nutrition assistance programs with “block grants” in three pilot states. A twenty-year history of data shows that block granting leads to large cuts in program funding over time and, in the short term, would jeopardize the integrity of this program to provide healthy meals to students. This is a risky experiment that endangers children’s wellbeing.

“There was a time when Democrats and Republicans put aside partisan differences to ensure that every child in need had access to healthy food. Tragically, it is all too apparent that such moments are a far cry from the politics of today,” Sister Simone Campbell added. “The House committee was presented with several amendments yesterday that could have made H.R. 5003 a bipartisan bill, but instead the committee leadership chose to push forward with partisan legislation that will strip too many of the help they need.”

Prior to the mark-up NETWORK joined with a diverse range of faith-based organizations calling on the committee to strengthen the bill to ensure that all children, regardless of race, class, or zip code have the food they need to reach their full potential. Now that the House Education and Workforce Committee majority has failed its responsibility to serve all children, NETWORK will continue to push for a bipartisan solution to child nutrition reauthorization.

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NETWORK, advocates for justice inspired by Catholic sisters, educates, organizes, and lobbies for economic and social transformation. They have a more than 40-year track record of lobbying for critical federal programs that support those at the margins and prioritize the common good.