



D.C. Hunger Solutions Five Year Anniversary Report



Five Years of Fighting Hunger in Washington, D.C.

An initiative of the Food Research and Action Center

April 2008

Dear Friends,

In the five years since the Food Research and Action Center launched D.C. Hunger Solutions, the landscape has changed in the District of Columbia — for the better!

Today, more than 18,000 children start the school day with a healthy breakfast, and close to 30,000 children have access to nutritious summer meals when school is out. In fact, Washington, D.C. now tops the nation in the percentage of children who receive federally subsidized summer meals and its summer food program has been hailed as a successful model for the nation. We also have made real progress in afterschool food, child care food, school wellness policies, access to food stamps, and a range of other initiatives.

Bolstered by these successes, strengthened by our many partnerships, and informed by the lessons learned along the way, we are intensifying our work to make sure that every District of Columbia resident has access to healthy and nutritious food. That means more than continuing to expand participation in federal nutrition programs and investments that support economic security. It also means making sure that schools, afterschool, and child care programs serve healthy food and that Washington, D.C. residents have access to reasonably-priced nutritious foods in their neighborhoods. With our new corner store and farmers' market initiatives, for example, we will bring more affordable fresh fruits and vegetables into low-income neighborhoods.

By engaging partners from both the private and public sectors, removing bureaucratic barriers, increasing outreach, and expanding the availability of healthy food in lower-income neighborhoods, we are moving well toward our goal of making sure that all Washington, D.C. residents have access to three nutritious meals a day. That will not only fight hunger, but also curb D.C.'s high obesity rates.

Our work has been made possible with the wonderful support of the District's foundations, nonprofits, businesses, residents, agencies, and public officials. As we look back at the past five years and set our goals for the upcoming five years, we believe that a hunger-free community in the District of Columbia is well within our grasp.

On behalf of D.C. Hunger Solutions, we extend our deepest thanks and our pledge to make even greater gains in the years to come.

Alexandra Ashbrook
Director, D.C. Hunger Solutions

James Weill
President, FRAC



The Problem

In the capital of the wealthiest nation on earth, one in eight households faces a constant struggle against hunger. Many children go without healthy meals. Adults struggling with low wages wonder if they have enough food to last the week. Seniors must choose between paying for food or for medicine.

Even when families can scrape together enough, a balanced and healthy diet is beyond their reach. Sometimes the outcome is obesity, an ironic byproduct of having too few resources to purchase good food. The result is a health crisis in the midst of the District's high rates of poverty and hunger.

Hunger and obesity result from low wages, a lack of information, and inadequate participation in nutrition and other assistance programs. Without proper nutrition or enough food, children do not develop to their full potential and adults are not as productive as they could be. The cost to government and society is far greater than what it would take to assure three healthy meals a day.

Mission and Strategy

D.C. Hunger Solutions, founded in 2002 as an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), works to create a hunger-free community by improving the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income people.

D.C. Hunger Solutions (DCHS) utilizes a three-pronged strategy to overcome barriers and create self-sustaining connections between city residents and nutritious food. Specifically, DCHS:

- **Seeks to improve public policies to end hunger, reduce poverty, promote nutrition, and curb obesity**, working to increase the availability of healthy, affordable food in low-income areas.
- **Maximizes participation in all federal nutrition programs** through a combination of vigorous outreach, removal of obstacles to participation, and close work with social service agencies.
- **Educates the public and key audiences** both to the stark reality of hunger's existence in the midst of plenty and to solutions that are already at hand.

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Five Years of Progress

In just five years, D.C. Hunger Solutions (DCHS) has played an important role in many initiatives, policy changes, and other key victories that have made positive differences in the lives of many District of Columbia individuals and families:

- **Making free school breakfasts available to all D.C. Public School students**, opening the door for thousands of additional children to receive a free nutritious morning meal.
- **Replacing junk food in D.C. Public School vending machines with nutritious, higher-quality snacks and drinks.**
- **Shaping the D.C. Public Schools' wellness policy**, implemented in the 2006-07 school year.
- **Doubling the number of District of Columbia children receiving free, nutritious meals during the summer** when school is out.
- **Shining a public spotlight on the lack of affordable, healthy food in low-income neighborhoods**, and launching campaigns to expand the capacity of farmers' markets to accept food stamps and to increase nutritious food in corner stores.
- **Shrinking an unwieldy 72-page application for the Afterschool Snack program to a streamlined 12-page application form.**
- **Serving on numerous working groups and committees that focus on ending hunger and poverty in the District**, including: the Mayor's Commission on Food and Nutrition, the D.C. Fair Budget Coalition, D.C. Action for Healthy Kids, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Collaborative.
- **Helping spearhead the creation of the Partnership to End Childhood Hunger in the Nation's Capital**, an unprecedented effort planned by DCHS, FRAC, and Share Our Strength, with initial support from the Case Foundation and the Sodexo Foundation, to ensure that every child in the District of Columbia has access to three nutritious meals a day within 10 years.
- **Connecting Spanish-speaking child care providers with federal nutrition program benefits** to help feed the students in their care.

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Nourishing Young Minds

Ask any teacher and you'll get the same response—when children start class without having eaten breakfast, their attention wanders, their behavior deteriorates, and their academic performance suffers. But when their stomachs are full and their minds and bodies are nourished, the positive transformation is nothing short of remarkable.

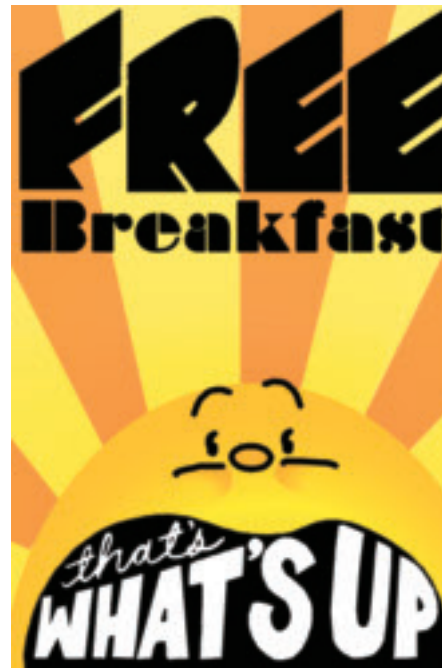
Research verifies this common sense observation. Offering breakfast at school improves students' attendance, increases their attentiveness and achievement, and reduces school nurse visits and classroom discipline problems. Participation in the school breakfast program also decreases the risks of obesity, since children and adolescents who eat breakfast are significantly less likely to be overweight than those who skip the meal and then overcompensate with higher caloric intake later in the day.

That is why one of D.C. Hunger Solutions' top priorities all along has been to make the school breakfast program free for all students in the D.C. Public Schools and charter schools and find ways to get more and more children into the program. School breakfast is supposed to ensure that every low-income child starts the school day well-fed and ready to learn, but too few children participate in the program.

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To fix this problem, DCHS took a three-step approach. First, DCHS conducted outreach to make schools, parents, and community organizations aware of the school breakfast program, its underutilization, and its enormous benefits in student performance and health.

Second, DCHS campaigned to make every student eligible for a free nutritious morning meal. This was vitally important not only for its own sake, but because



it would remove the stigma some children felt when they received breakfast at school, as if a sign was placed around their necks saying “I’m poor.” If everybody can get breakfast, that is no longer an issue, and more low-income children will participate.


DCHS won an important victory

when the District of Columbia public schools agreed to make breakfast free for all students starting in the 2005-2006 school year. DCHS helped ensure the success of the new policy by providing intensive technical assistance in implementing universal school breakfasts.

The results speak for themselves:

- In the free breakfast program's first year, 8 percent more students were participating.
- The D.C. Public Schools now reach 47.2 percent of low-income students with school breakfasts.
- The D.C. Public Schools even benefited financially, as the school breakfast expansion brought in more than \$4 million in additional federal funds.
- Charter schools now offer breakfast at 70 out of 77 campuses, a huge jump from 2002, when breakfast was served at only 12 schools.

In the third phase of the plan, now under way, DCHS is working to make breakfast a standard part of the school day by encouraging schools to feed students in classrooms, provide "Grab-and-Go Breakfast Bags" on carts wheeled through the hallways, and/or offer a "Second Chance Breakfast" between first and second periods. Initiatives, studies, and pilot projects in other



"Before there was school breakfast, I always kept sandwich crackers to give children for breakfast. I asked them if they had had breakfast and when their response was no, I would give them something to eat. Breakfast makes a difference! Those who have eaten are able to function at a much higher level than those who do not eat breakfast. I am grateful for the free breakfast program.

Washington, D.C., School Teacher

cities show that these strategies for bringing breakfast to students, rather than making them arrive well before school starts and go to the cafeteria, further remove barriers to participation and give an added boost to children's achievement, nutrition, and health, and to the schools' environment.

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Keeping Students Well

It may seem like a contradiction in terms, but childhood hunger and obesity often go hand-in-hand. Both can be consequences of inadequate resources and improper nutrition, and both often coexist within the same families. That is why DCHS' efforts to end childhood hunger are also designed to reduce obesity and the other health consequences of inadequate nutrition ranging from students' hunger headaches to an increased risk of diabetes.

The first place to start in this interconnected quest is in the schools, where children spend so much of the day and receive much of their food. Unfortunately, in many D.C. schools, unhealthy foods such as vending machine snacks and soft drinks and less nutritious "à la carte" cafeteria items were competing with federally-funded school meals that must meet basic nutrition standards.

That is why DCHS, along with the D.C. Action for Healthy Kids Coalition (co-chaired by DCHS' director) led a drive first in seven pilot schools and then citywide to replace junk food in D.C. Public School vending machines with more nutritious, higher-quality snacks and drinks.

The success of the pilot program, combined with DCHS' and the coalition's advocacy, led the D.C. Board of Education to make these changes throughout the entire school district.

To ensure the program's success, DCHS conducted focus groups with children to determine which nutritious foods appealed the most to them. Thus, the children essentially got to pick which new healthy foods and drinks were carried in vending machines. DCHS also collaborated with the D.C. Public Schools in presenting and promoting the new food choices so that students would find them not only appealing, but also "cool."

Building on these achievements, DCHS worked closely with the D.C. Public Schools to help craft creation of its




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first-ever school wellness policy, which was adopted for the 2006-07 school year. The policy, closely following DCHS' recommendations for low-income children, includes:

- Twice-a-week physical education for students in kindergarten through 10th grade;
- Improved nutrition standards for all foods available on school campuses during the school day;
- More frequent nutrition education; and
- Re-affirmation of other positive policies DCHS had helped put in place, such as universal free breakfasts, nutritious afterschool snacks, and healthy vending in school machines.

In addition, more than half of the District of Columbia's 57 charter schools have drafted similar policies, all based on DCHS' template.



D.C. Hunger Solutions led the effort to replace junk food in D.C. Public School vending machines with nutritious snacks and drinks, and to craft the District's first-ever school wellness policy setting strong standards for physical education, nutrition education, and healthy food.

Keeping Hunger at Bay in the Summer

Children who receive school breakfasts and lunches during the school year also need good nutrition during the summer. For many low-income children, however, hunger doesn't take a vacation — it comes back in summertime with a vengeance.

Federal funding is available for nutritious meals and snacks through the federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), but when DCHS was founded in late 2002, only 15,000 District of Columbia children had been served the previous summer, and the numbers had been dropping from year to year. That is why DCHS started a comprehensive campaign to rebuild the program.

In March 2003, DCHS issued a report, *Picking Up the Pieces: What Went Wrong in the District's Summer Food Service Program in 2002, and How to Rebuild in 2003*, that was a catalyst for needed improvements.

Under DCHS' leadership, the community came together to implement the report's recommendations. This resulted in the recruitment of several new community sponsors into the program, but many problems persisted. In response, Mayor Anthony Williams commissioned a Blue Ribbon Task Force on Child Nutrition, to



which then-DCHS executive director Kim Perry was appointed. New leadership of the city agency in charge of the program became a third critical factor in turning the situation around.


DCHS kept up the pressure for improvements through its own outreach, which included the recruitment of the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation as a sponsor,

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its advocacy before the City Council and the D.C. agency running the summer food program, its outreach to the press, and its work through the Mayor's Task Force. Specifically, DCHS urged the city to streamline the payment process, systematically identify the highest-need areas, simplify the summer food application, recruit new partners, and sign up 150 new sites for the program. DCHS also secured Comcast Cable as a partner in outreach and marketing, and used local media and multilingual outreach flyers in a marketing blitz to attract more children to free summer feeding sites.

The results of our multi-year efforts were clear: for the summer of 2007, almost 30,000 children received free nutritious meals, doubling the number served when DCHS was founded in 2002. In addition, DCHS succeeded in extending the number of weeks summer food programs were run so that a greater percentage of the nutrition gap was filled for children at risk of hunger and obesity.

Continuing our success remains a top priority, as well as addressing the quality of the food offered at summer meal sites.



D.C. Hunger Solutions' efforts played a central role in increasing the number of children receiving free, nutritious summer meals from the D.C. Free Summer Meals Program from 13,213 in 2002 to 29,158 in 2007.

Taking a Fresh Approach to Hunger

Fueling the twin scourges of hunger and obesity in Washington, D.C. is lack of access to affordable, nutritious food. Many low-income neighborhoods do not have supermarkets or other sources of healthy food choices, and many residents lack transportation to stores or markets selling healthy food. Instead, they are forced to rely on convenience stores selling few, if any, fruits and vegetables – especially fresh and at reasonable prices – and stocking packaged foods that are typically high in fat, sodium, and calories with little nutritional value. In the few instances where corner stores do sell more healthful foods, such as fresh produce or a variety of milk, the prices often are significantly higher than in other areas of the city.

This was the main finding of a 2006 D.C. Hunger Solutions report, *Healthy Food, Healthy Communities: An Assessment and Scorecard of Community Food Security in the District of Columbia*.

The report revealed that residents in low-income D.C. neighborhoods face limited access to grocery stores, high costs for what few healthy options might be available, and inadequate food source alternatives, such as grocery cooperatives, community-supported

agriculture programs, and community gardens. Among its recommendations were to focus on expanding farmers' markets, integrate them more with their communities, and make them better equipped to serve low-income customers.

DCCHS immediately went to work implementing these recommendations by reviving the D.C. Farmers' Market Collaborative, bringing together farmers' market managers, anti-hunger advocates, and other local leaders to ensure that markets have the capacity to serve low-income neighborhoods and individuals. DCCHS issued a report *Food Stamps Accepted Here: Attracting Low-Income Consumers to Farmers' Markets* to highlight effective



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strategies for markets and other stakeholders to pursue. DCCHS also founded the Healthy, Affordable Food for All Coalition, a group of anti-hunger and health advocates working to create reliable access to affordable fresh food in every neighborhood and in schools.

DCCHS is implementing three specific campaigns to start addressing the dearth of fresh fruits and vegetables in low-income District of Columbia neighborhoods by:

- **Bringing food stamp recipients and farmers' markets together.** DCCHS is coordinating a city-wide outreach and publicity campaign to draw food stamp participants to four strategically selected farmers' markets. To help ensure the success of this effort, DCCHS is reaching out to the markets to provide them with wireless EBT machines for food stamp recipients starting in spring 2008. This effort includes providing hardware, training, technical assistance, and a stipend to pay for transaction and processing fees, labor, and other project costs.
- **Making corner stores healthier** through an initiative to expand their inventories with fresh and frozen produce, low-fat milk, lower-fat snacks, and whole grain breakfast cereals modeled after the Healthy Stores projects of the Johns Hopkins Center for Human Nutrition in Baltimore and of The Food

D.C. Hunger Solutions revived the D.C. Farmers' Market Collaborative to bring fresh, nutritious produce directly to low-income neighborhoods lacking access to healthy food, and recently launched a pilot project to give farmers' markets the capacity to accept food stamps.

Trust in Philadelphia. It will include a pilot social marketing campaign based in three corner stores to encourage consumers to choose healthy items for snacks and meals. This initiative is funded by the D.C. Department of Health, Community Health Administration.

- Working with the Capital Area Food Bank and D.C. Fair Budget Coalition to **assemble a proposal for a District government Fresh Food Opportunities Bank** to pursue multiple strategies designed to bring healthy foods into low-income neighborhoods.

Filling the Afternoon Food Gap

Afterschool programs play an essential role in keeping children safe and advancing their learning and healthy development in the critical hours between the time school lets out and when their parents come home from work. Moreover, as any afterschool care worker or stay-at-home parent will testify, children need a nutritious mid-afternoon snack to keep their blood sugar levels — and their behavior and attention spans — from crashing.

Federal funding is available for afterschool programs to provide nutritious snacks — and, in some cases, dinners for children whose parents work late — but until recently, many Washington, D.C. programs were not making use of this vital assistance.

In part, this was because District agencies weren't facilitating use of the program. D.C. Hunger Solutions identified several major barriers, including lack of information about available funding and, even more significantly, a cumbersome, 72-page application that afterschool programs were required to fill out.

DCHS worked with the city government to create a new, streamlined, “user-friendly” application form that was only 12 pages long. The revised form immediately helped




boost afterschool nutrition assistance in the District. In a related step to cut unneeded “red tape,” DCHS negotiated with the D.C. government to simplify the lengthy training sessions required for afterschool food sponsors. As a result, sponsors can now be trained on-site once, rather than being required to visit a government office at least three times.

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In addition, DCHS distributed its new afterschool snack brochure to afterschool providers around the city, giving more than 80 presentations and providing technical assistance to 37 programs to guide them through the application process.

DCHS made further improvements in 2006, developing four specialized versions of the application, including one for new afterschool snack participants and another for existing sponsors' renewal. DCHS also embarked on an aggressive recruitment program.

The results of these efforts were powerful. Between fiscal years 2005 and 2006, the number of District of Columbia children receiving snacks and meals through the afterschool food program skyrocketed from 2,040 to 9,343.



D.C. Hunger Solutions worked with the District of Columbia government to reduce the application form for nutrition assistance to afterschool programs from 72 pages to 12 pages, and more than quadrupled participation in just one year.

Solving Hunger One Step at a Time

In its first five years of existence, D.C. Hunger Solutions continually expanded its efforts, tackling new challenges and adding new strategies to its portfolio. These include:

Ensuring that more low-income families receive the Earned Income Tax Credit. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) provides cash payments to working families even if they earn too little to owe income tax, but owe payroll and other taxes. Many families eligible for the EITC are at risk of hunger and are also eligible for food stamps. DCHS is working to combine food stamp and EITC outreach into one seamless effort, as both programs enable low-income working families to better afford nutritious food, stretch their budgets and achieve greater economic stability. This minimizes the amount of time families must spend seeking information and eliminates redundancy in outreach. DCHS also cross-trains organizations and agencies so that they can provide information and assistance on the broadest possible range of family-support programs.

Issuing the Food Stamp Challenge. To bring home how urgently food stamp benefits must be increased to reflect the real-world cost of feeding a family, DCHS issued a challenge to the Washington, D.C. community

to live on a food stamp budget for a week and see first-hand how difficult it is to get by on the average benefit of \$1 per person per meal. DCHS Director Alexandra Ashbrook took the challenge, as did Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), D.C. Council Chairman Vincent C. Gray, foundation staff, and community leaders. At the same time, a national Food Stamp Challenge was initiated by Reps. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) and Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.). They invited Ashbrook to accompany them on their initial local shopping trip to purchase food for the week. The Food Stamp Challenge was essential in building support for bills pending in Congress that increase food stamp benefits.



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Expanding nutrition assistance to child care providers. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides federal assistance to child development centers and family day care homes, enabling them to provide nutritious meals and snacks to low-income children in their care. DCHS is targeting outreach to 51 child development centers serving approximately 3,000 low-income children that are not yet participating in CACFP. This enables child care providers to gain vital new assistance that not only helps them serve healthy food but also helps them to expand their capacity to meet the need for quality child development services in their neighborhoods. In addition, DCHS is working to streamline the program's monitoring and training requirements and is developing a nutrition education and physical fitness workshop that will give child care providers information on how better to meet the health needs of the children in their care.

Increasing participation in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program. The WIC Program provides vital supplemental nutrition assistance to low-income pregnant and postpartum women and young children, but it also is underutilized in the District. DCHS is working with the District of Columbia government and key stakeholders to develop a comprehensive outreach strategy targeting those who are eligible but hardest to

connect with — immigrants, older pre-school children, and low-income wage earners. DCHS also is building a coalition involving the medical community, the D.C. government, immigrant groups, women's organizations, neighborhood associations, and others to promote WIC awareness and distribute outreach materials to referral sources and those eligible but not currently participating. In addition, DCHS is encouraging WIC clinics to establish more flexible hours, and working with government officials to make sure that newly revised rules to improve WIC's healthfulness are carried out.

Ensuring culturally appropriate help in public assistance offices. Many of the District of Columbia's low-income households at risk of hunger include Spanish-, Vietnamese-, and Chinese-speaking immigrants. However, publications on nutrition and other forms of assistance were not available in these languages at welfare and other offices. DCHS provided extensive training to make it easier for immigrants and speakers of limited English proficiency to receive the services they need and helped advocate for multilanguage written materials.

Funders

D.C. Hunger Solutions gratefully acknowledges the following funders whose generous support during the first five years of the project has made our work possible.

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- Share Our Strength



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D.C. Hunger Solutions | 1875 Connecticut Avenue | Suite 540 | Washington, DC 20009
phone 202.986.2200 | fax 202.986.2525 | info@dchunger.org | www.dchunger.org