



**FY24 BUDGET OVERSIGHT HEARING
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE HEARING
EDUCATION AGENCIES**

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5, 2023

**TESTIMONY OF LAMONIKA N. JONES
INTERIM DIRECTOR, D.C. HUNGER SOLUTIONS**

Greetings Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee. Thank you for convening this hearing and allowing me to come before you to provide testimony on the proposed FY24 budget for the District's education agencies. My name is LaMonika Jones, and I serve as the Interim Director of D.C. Hunger Solutions where we focus on ending hunger in the Nation's capital through the highest and best use of our federal nutrition assistance programs. As an initiative of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), our mission is to improve the nutrition, health, economic security, and well-being of low-income District residents. Specifically, our works aims to improve public policies to end hunger, reduce poverty, promote nutrition, curb obesity, and increase the availability of healthy, affordable food in low-income areas. We aim to maximize participation in federal nutrition programs – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Child and Adult Food Care Program (CACFP), Women, Infant and Children Program (WIC) and D.C. Youth Meals Program (known federal as Summer Food Service Program) - through a combination of outreach, removal of obstacles to participation, and close work with social service agencies. We also purpose to educate the public and key audiences both to the stark reality of hunger's existence amid plenty and to solutions that are already at hand.

As we know, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed the difficult, undue burden of ensuring early childhood and school age children retain access to healthy and nutritious meals. The pandemic has also exacerbated the difficulty many families living with low-income continue to experience when purchasing necessary food resources. Acknowledging the strain the pandemic has placed on families as well as local school districts, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) Food



and Nutrition Services (FNS) through federal waiver authority, permitted school food authorities such as D.C. Public Schools and D.C. Public Charter Schools to serve school meals at no cost to students.

Although federal waivers offered support to D.C. Public Schools and D.C. Public Charter Schools, school nutrition staff, working in conjunction with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), continue to experience unprecedented challenges with providing meal options for students. Supply chain disruptions and rising food costs continue to uncharacteristically make it difficult for school nutrition staff to procure food (and non-food items). As reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics for January 2023, the Mid-Atlantic Region food costs have increased by an estimated 7% over the past year in 2022¹. In response to this and in order to alleviate challenges, USDA FNS has allocated a third round of funding totaling [\\$471M to local schools districts](#) to assist with purchasing food for school meals.

However, as of June 30, 2022, prior to the start of this current school year, federal waiver authority allowing free school meals was not extended. This means of the estimated 95,000 students attending either D.C. Public or D.C. Public Charter Schools, who qualify for free and reduced meals and whose school does not participate in the [Community Eligibility Provision \(CEP\)](#), their families must resume paying for school meals. CEP allows high-need schools to offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge. Any school district, group of schools in a district, or school with 40 percent or more “identified students” (children who are certified eligible for free school meals without a household application) can choose to participate. “Identified students” include children directly certified through data-matching because their households receive the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the Food Distribution Program for Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and in some states, Medicaid benefits, as well as children who are certified for free meals without an application because they are homeless, migrant, enrolled

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics. *Consumer Price Index, Washington-Arlington-Alexandria area – January 2023*. https://www.bls.gov/regions/mid-atlantic/news-release/consumerpriceindex_washingtondc.htm. Accessed on April 4, 2023



in Head Start, or in foster care. Eighty-nine of 117 D.C. Public Schools and 39 D.C. Public Charter Schools currently participate in CEP.

With this understanding, coupled with the 9% of District residents who are considered food insecure according to USDA Economic Recovery Service² it is imperative D.C. Council conduct a hearing for and fully fund the Universal School Meals Amendment Act of 2023. This legislation will allocate \$8M to ensuring all District students, regardless of income, have access to healthy school meals, reducing the stigma often attached to those who qualify for free and reduced meals. With passage and full funding of universal school meals in the District, students who reside in households experiencing low-income will be free to consume school meals at no cost resulting in higher test scores, decreased absence from school, and overall improved health and well-being.

Furthermore, not only will the Universal School Meals Amendment Act allow school meals to be served to students at no cost, but this legislation will also reduce the administrative burden experienced by school nutrition staff when operating school meals programs. This means more time and attention can be dedicated to improved procurement practices within District schools. With improved school procurement practices in mind and as a member, D.C. Hunger Solutions encourages further implementation of the D.C. Chapter of the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP). GFPP seeks to transform the way public institutions, including D.C. schools, purchase food, creating a more transparent and equitable food system. To achieve these goals, D.C. Hunger Solutions, supports GFPP's values-based food procurement program, currently being implemented by D.C. Public Schools (DCPS). The GFPP is rooted in five core values: local economies, nutrition, valued workforce, environmental sustainability, and animal welfare.

D.C. Hunger Solutions encourages funding to be allocated in the FY 2024 budget to support current GFPP implementation at DCPS thus expanding values-based procurement across all District agencies purchasing food. DCPS is currently implementing the GFPP as required by the [Healthy Students Amendment Act](#). DCPS completed a baseline assessment of

² U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Economic Recovery Service. *Household Food Insecurity in the United States in 2021*. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/104656/err-309.pdf?v=5063.6>. Accessed on April 4, 2023



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its purchasing in 2019; however, subsequent progress has been stalled due to the pandemic and a lack of dedicated resources. As a member of GFPP, we therefore request the dedication of funds to support resumed implementation in DCPS schools. In particular, we ask for \$110,000 in recurring funds to support 1 FTE at DCPS to oversee values-based food procurement and GFPP implementation strategy. Additionally, we support GFPP's ask for \$17,000 in recurring funds to cover annual GFPP assessments to track and measure DCPS's progress over time.

Finally, I want to recognize and acknowledge the dedication OSSE, D.C. Public and D.C. Public Charter Schools continue to exude while navigating the challenging task of maximizing school meal participation during the pandemic. Agency leaders and school nutrition staff have shown their commitment to students while working through the most challenging of times. I encourage the Committee as well as D.C. Council to continue its support of OSSE, D.C. Public and Public Charter Schools as they work to recover from the effects of the public health emergency. We applaud D.C. Public and D.C. Public Charter Schools' efforts to purchase healthy and sustainable food for students, and we urge the Committee along with all of D.C. Council to expand these efforts to all District agencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony.

With regard,

LaMonika N. Jones
Interim Director
D.C. Hunger Solutions