

April 23, 2019

Dear Chairs Bishop and Hoeven and Ranking Members Fortenberry and Merkley:

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides critical technical assistance for schools to meet the school foods nutrition standards. In particular, schools are still working on sodium reduction to help meet safe levels of salt in breakfast and lunch. As you craft the fiscal year (FY) 2020 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies spending bill, we respectfully request \$1,000,000 for critical technical assistance to aid schools in successful sodium reduction.

According to 2017 USDA data (based on the latest that is publicly available), virtually all schools are meeting the first sodium-reduction targets, which is a great step toward improving health in children. However, Target 1 levels are still well above the recommended amounts for safe sodium consumption for children. For example, an elementary school lunch can have up to 1,230 mg of sodium, or more than three-fourths a day's worth for a child in one meal. A high school lunch can have 1,420 mg of sodium, or about half a day's worth.

Excessive sodium puts children's health at risk. Nine out of ten children today eat too much salt, and high salt intake is linked to elevated blood pressure, even in youth, which later in life can lead to heart disease and stroke, two of the leading causes of death, disability, and high healthcare costs. One in seven children aged 12 to 19 years has elevated blood pressure, which increases risk of heart disease, stroke, and adult hypertension. The National Academy of Medicine's updated Dietary Reference Intake (DRI) report on sodium, released last month, reviewed the evidence on the adverse health effects of excessive sodium and confirmed long-standing advice to lower sodium intake. The report lowered the maximum amount of safe levels of sodium intake for younger school-aged children: from 2,200 mg to 1,800 mg for children aged 9-13 and from 1,900 mg to 1,500 mg for children aged 4-8. This new report yet again makes clear that current amounts of sodium in school meals are increasing the risk of diet-related disease for school children. While we remain concerned that USDA delayed the second sodium-reduction targets by seven years (originally set for SY2017-2018 to SY2024-2025) and eliminated the third targets entirely (originally set for SY2022-2023), it is important that we continue to help schools move forward to at least achieve Target 2 levels.

The Department has stated that it intends to continue providing sodium-reduction technical assistance to schools. However, USDA's technical assistance on sodium reduction in schools has been significantly reduced, if not eliminated. For instance, every technical assistance grant before FY2018 to the state agencies (Team Nutrition grants) supported sodium reduction, including some grants that explicitly included these efforts as part of the funding. Further, USDA led an initiative called *What's Shaking? Creative Ways to Boost Flavor With Less Sodium* which created and housed resources, including a website, to aid schools in sodium reduction, and collaborated with national organizations to foster strategies and best practices. The website for *What's Shaking?* has not been active since 2017. Dedicated funding to support further sodium reduction is necessary.

In addition to targeted technical assistance funding, USDA should provide a report to Congress detailing sodium reduction technical assistance efforts by the Department and progress by schools to meet the second sodium-reduction targets. The transparency afforded by the report will make clear how sodium reduction efforts are progressing and allow USDA and other stakeholders to identify unique challenges, available resources, and efforts needed to safeguard child nutrition and health.

Sincerely,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

American Heart Association

American Public Health Association

American Society for Nutrition

Balanced

Center for Science in the Public Interest

Consumer Federation of America

Ehrens Consulting

Environmental Working Group

FoodCorps

Healthy School Food Maryland

Michigan Advocates for Healthy Checkouts

National Association of County and City Health Officials

National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners

National PTA

National WIC Association

Newground Social Investment

NorthWest Initiative

Public Health Advocates

Public Health Institute

Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia

The Food Trust

Union of Concerned Scientists