WHAT'S IN THE *HEALTHY MEALS, HEALTHY KIDS ACT* FOR BABIES?

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The House Committee on Education and Labor recently approved the *Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act* (H.R. 8450) which includes many important provisions for babies, toddlers, and their families. Introduced by Chairman Bobby Scott (D-VA), and Representative Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR), the bill would reauthorize critical child nutrition programs, including The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) school meals, and summer feeding programs and would make significant improvements to nutrition programs supporting infants, toddlers, and their families.

Nutrition is a vital part of healthy development for very young children – especially those under three – as good nutrition feeds their rapidly growing brains and bodies. Growing brains rely on a balanced and nutrient rich diet, yet too many families with young children are experiencing food insecurity. According to the State of Babies Yearbook: 2022, 14.9% of infants and toddlers live in households facing food insecurity.[i] The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic downturn resulted in a far greater number of families struggling to meet their basic needs like keeping food on the table. At the height of the pandemic, it was reported that 30% of families with young children were experiencing hunger.[ii] Research shows that even mild levels of food insecurity in the first years of life puts children at developmental risk.[iii]

Good nutrition is also important for parents: eating nutritious foods during pregnancy provides pregnant people and their children the nutrients they need to stay healthy, active, and strong. Balanced nutrients during pregnancy yield more energy, a stronger immune system, and reduced risk of disease. Access to a nutrient dense diet during pregnancy also reduces the chance of complications such as anemia, low birth weight, and birth defects[iv] supporting healthy growth and development in the womb.

The provisions in this bill work to tackle food insecurity and access to strong nutrition for families head on by strengthening programs that are proven to have an enormous impact on babies' development and parents' ability to meet their own basic needs.

The *Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act* would improve outcomes for babies, toddlers, and their families by including critical provisions for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) by:

- **Expanding access to WIC:** This bill extends postpartum eligibility to two years from 6 months postpartum and extends child eligibility to age six or the beginning of kindergarten from the child's first birthday, expanding access to WIC for thousands of families.
- **Modernizing WIC:** This bill includes provisions that would allow for increased flexibilities in accessing and utilizing WIC services including by permitting the use of phone or video certification options beyond the public health emergency declaration from COVID-19. Beyond waiving the need for physical presence, the bill allows for online and mobile payments in WIC.
- **Increasing adjunctive eligibility in WIC:** This bill allows for increased adjunctive, or automatic, eligibility for those residing in a household where a member participates in WIC by requiring WIC to automatically certify infants born to a mother participating in WIC while also extending

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eligibility to women, infants, or children under six residing in a household in which a member participates in the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Head Start, Early Head Start, or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).

- **Streamlining CACFP certification:** This bill simplifies eligibility for for-profit child care centers by allowing annual eligibility.
- **Requiring automatic CACFP eligibility for children in SNAP households:** This bill allows a child to be automatically eligible for CACFP benefits if the child is a member of a household that receives Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- **Authorizing an additional meal or snack in CACFP:** This bill allows for reimbursement of up to two meals and two snacks, or three meals and one snack per child per day for children in care for at least eight hours a day.
- **Improving CACFP reimbursement rates for child care home providers:** The bill improves reimbursement rate adjustments for child care home providers by using the Consumer Price Index for food away from home to calculate the adjustment, helping to ensure that the reimbursement is in line with the cost of providing a healthy meal through CACFP.

To learn more about what is included in the *Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act*, read the section by section summary from the House Committee on Education and Labor.

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[i] Keating, K., & Heinemeier, S. (2022). State of babies yearbook: 2022. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE. https://stateofbabies.org/

[ii] Center for Translational Neuroscience. (2020). Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development Early Childhood Household Survey Project. University of Oregon [data set]. https://ctn.uoregon.edu/projects/rapid-assessment-pandemic-impact-development-rapid-early-childhood

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[iv] Digitale, E. (2011). Overall quality of pregnant woman's diet affects risk for two types of birth defects, study shows. Stanford School of Medicine. https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2011/10/overall-quality-of-pregnant-womans-diet-affects-risk-for-two-types-of-birth-defects-study-shows.html

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