



# Improving Childhood Nutrition in Virginia

Increasing access to fresh and nutritious food can help strengthen national security

## Acknowledgements

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

### **Mission: Readiness**

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble.

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**70%**  
of Virginia youth  
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17 and 24 cannot  
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### Summary

**In Virginia, 70 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 cannot serve in the military due to issues such as lack of education, a record of crime or substance abuse, or medical disqualifiers; very much in line with the slightly higher national rate.<sup>1</sup> Obesity is one of the main medical disqualifiers, and rates of obesity among young people are on the rise.<sup>2</sup> This trend is especially concerning because individuals who would otherwise be eligible to serve are being disqualified due to excess weight.<sup>3</sup>**

While obesity in children has increased in recent years, working to ensure that kids have access to fresh and nutritious foods has long been a vital component in keeping children healthy and fit. In 1945, Major General Lewis Hershey, the Director of the Selective Service System, testified to

Congress that at least 40 percent of recruits during World War II were rejected for reasons related to poor nutrition. The following year, Congress established the National School Lunch Program as a “measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children” by ensuring they had access to nutritious meals.<sup>4</sup>

Just as the military leaders of the past knew that promoting healthy eating was an effective way to ensure that the armed forces stayed strong, retired military leaders today believe that increased access to fresh and nutritious food for all children is a national security imperative.

Today, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), together with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Nutrition Incentives program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for

Women Infants and Children (WIC) play a significant role in combating obesity. These programs increase consistent access to fresh and nutritious food throughout a child's development into young adulthood.

### **Causes and consequences of poor nutrition**

Individuals from all income levels in the United States do not consume enough fresh fruits and vegetables. These poor dietary habits can lead to multiple health issues, including obesity.<sup>5</sup> In addition to being one of the major disqualifiers for military service, obesity can lead to health issues throughout life. Obesity in childhood can lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, joint problems, asthma, and high cholesterol, as well as an increased risk of obesity in adulthood.<sup>6</sup>

### **Lack of access to fresh, healthy foods contributes to obesity and can impact military readiness**

Between 1999 and 2016, obesity rates increased significantly for children and adults throughout the U.S.<sup>7</sup> In Virginia, 30.4 percent of adults, and 13.2 percent of children ages 10-17, were obese in 2018.<sup>8</sup> These rates are not only a concern for public health, but for national security as well. The health problems caused by obesity in young people can impact their future ability to serve in the armed forces. Improving access to fresh and nutritious foods can improve children's health and reduce obesity, which can increase national security by ensuring the military has a healthy pool of recruits.<sup>9</sup>

### **Combating Childhood Obesity: Improve access to fresh and nutritious foods**

Consistent access to fresh and nutritious foods from birth through young adulthood is essential to combating obesity. As of 2015, 14 percent of Virginia children experienced food insecurity, which the USDA defines as a reduction in the quality, variety, or desirability of diet, or a disruption in eating patterns and reduced food intake due to a household lack of resources, financial or otherwise, necessary to obtain adequate food.<sup>10</sup> Children who experience food insecurity are at a higher risk for obesity.<sup>11</sup>

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs work in partnership with states and private nonprofits to address food insecurity, and improve access to fresh and nutritious foods for children in the U.S.

As annual military recruitment goals are consistently difficult to attain due to

“To ensure kids grow up strong, healthy, and ready for any career they choose, we must provide all Virginia families with consistent access to fresh and nutritious food.”



**Admiral (Ret.) James Loy**  
U.S. Coast Guard

disqualifiers, the retired admirals and generals of Mission: Readiness believe that America must prioritize efforts to combat childhood obesity throughout a child's development. Key to this effort are federal nutrition programs including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Nutrition Incentives Program, and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. **These programs are particularly important in Virginia, where young adults are 17 percent more likely to serve in the Armed Forces than the national average.**<sup>12</sup> Promoting access to fresh, nutritious food among Virginia's youth will help reduce obesity and allow more Virginians to pursue their dreams of serving their country.

## National School Lunch Program

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the oldest food and nutrition assistance program in the U.S. The program was started to provide consistent access to nutritious meals for children at school. The NSLP provides vegetables, fruit, lean protein, whole grains, and low-fat or fat-free milk with each school lunch. Children who participate in NSLP consume fewer empty calories and more fruits and vegetables than their peers who do not eat school lunch. **Participation in NSLP is also associated with a lower body mass index.**<sup>13</sup> **Estimates suggest that free or reduced-price school lunches can reduce the rate of obesity by at least 17 percent.**<sup>14</sup>

In FY2018, NSLP operated in almost 100,000 pre-K-12 schools and child care facilities throughout the U.S. In 2018, schools around the country served five billion lunches, and many of these meals



are being consumed by children who might otherwise have difficulty accessing fresh, nutritious food. Research has shown that children from homes that experience food insecurity were more likely to eat school meals, and received more of their intake of food and nutrients from school meals than children who were food secure.<sup>15</sup>

Each school day in Virginia, nearly 50 percent of students enrolled in school eat school lunch.<sup>16</sup> However, NSLP alone cannot combat the rising rates of obesity and subsequent medical disqualifiers for military service. Other federal programs are crucial to addressing issues of affordability, access, and availability of fresh and nutritious foods for children.

## Summer Food Service Program

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides children from low-income families with healthy meals as well as recreation and education programs during the summer. This interwoven approach is vital for children who are eligible because they provide not only nutritious meals, thereby combating food insecurity, but also educational programming to help combat weight gain. During the summer, food insecurity rates increase because students lose the consistent access to healthy foods that they get during the school year. Studies have shown that increased availability of summer meals helps to reduce food insecurity.<sup>17</sup>

In July 2018, nearly three million children participated in the program each day, a rate of only one child per every seven that participated in free and reduced-price lunch during the 2017-2018 school year. Between July 2017 and July 2018, participation in the SFSP decreased by nearly six percent, marking the third year in a row of declining participation rates.<sup>18</sup>

In Virginia, only 66,000 participants, representing 16 percent of NSLP participants, accessed SFSP. During the summer of 2018, summer food program rate participation decreased to 64,000, or 15 percent of NLSP participants.<sup>19</sup> Between July 2017 and July 2018, participation in the Summer Nutrition Program decreased by nearly six percent, marking the third year in a row of declining participation rates.<sup>20</sup> These numbers illustrate the inconsistent food access that school lunch program participants may experience; they have access to healthy, nutritious food during the school year, but a large majority of students do not during the summer.<sup>21</sup>

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It is important to address these decreases in participation and ensure that children are able to get the nutrition they need during the summer months, as well as the rest of the year.<sup>22</sup> Increasing the reach of the Summer Meal Service Program could contribute to a reduction in food insecurity. Innovative mobile food dissemination sites, assistance in addressing the financial strain on low income families over the summer, and developing private and community food delivery options should be explored.<sup>23</sup>

## Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

In 2018, nationally, SNAP provided benefits that allowed over 40 million Americans to purchase healthy food. In 2017, the most recent year demographic data was available, children under the age of five accounted for 13 percent of SNAP participants.<sup>24</sup> In Virginia, 44 percent of families receiving SNAP benefits had children.<sup>25</sup> **Participation in SNAP has been shown to reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents; the program is**



**estimated to reduce childhood obesity by five percent.<sup>26</sup>**

The Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program aims to support the increased purchase of fruits and vegetables among SNAP participants by providing incentives at the point of purchase.<sup>27</sup> One such incentive program, Virginia Fresh Match, is a network of stores and farmers markets across the state that double the value of SNAP benefits for fresh fruit and vegetable purchases, allowing participants to afford more fresh, nutritious food. In 2018, there were over 250 farmers markets in Virginia, but only half of them accepted SNAP. However, VFM recently received federal funding through 2021 to expand into retail grocery stores and other markets currently unserved by this nutrition incentive.<sup>28</sup>

By increasing access and addressing affordability, more children from low-income families will have consistent fresh fruits and vegetables. This vital partnership between federal, state and non-profit partners contributes to the reduction in childhood obesity among SNAP participating families.

**Women, Infants, and Children**

Healthy nutrition is important at all phases of life, especially before birth and during the first five years of a child's life. Some of the factors that can lead to obesity in childhood include gestational diabetes, excess maternal weight gain during pregnancy, and high birth weight. Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) helps to reduce these risks by providing nutrition education and promoting healthy eating for pregnant

women and children under five years old. Today, WIC focuses on improving access to fresh and nutritious foods in communities where participants live.<sup>29</sup>

**Participation in WIC has been linked to better overall dietary quality, increased fruit and vegetable consumption, and reduced intake of added sugars.<sup>30</sup> Between 2010-2016, many WIC agencies across the United States saw decreased rates of obesity in children between two and four years old.**

During this time period, the percentage of children with obesity enrolled in the program fell from 16 percent in 2010 to 14 percent in 2016; these trends reflect the impact that access to fresh and

nutritious foods may have in reducing childhood obesity.<sup>31</sup>

As of June 2019, over 109,000 participants in Virginia accessed the WIC program as part of an integrated effort by the state to promote healthy eating.<sup>32</sup> In addition to commitment to supporting the health of children and families, Virginia is committed to making sure that WIC participants have reasonable access to retail locations participating in WIC.<sup>33</sup> Removing barriers of access and affordability is critical to reducing obesity rates.

Such commitments and integration of services at the earliest years of a child's life are essential to and combating childhood obesity.

## Conclusion

Ensuring that all children have consistent access to fresh and nutritious food at all stages of development—prenatally, birth to five, and school-age—is critical to having healthy young adults. Increased investments at the state and federal levels, innovations at the community, state and federal levels, modernizations in food delivery, and diversification of access points to fresh and nutritious foods will support children's health and well-being throughout the year.

Over 70 years ago, our military leaders sounded the alarm that nutritional deficiencies in America's youth were affecting military readiness, which led to the first federal nutrition assistance program. Today, as a staggering number of our young adults are not eligible to serve, many because they are too overweight, access to fresh and nutritious foods throughout a child's development must be treated as a key component of our national security. This is critical to ensuring that our youth grow up healthy and prepared to succeed in the military or at whatever career they choose.

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