

Making a Difference: Insights from Julie Paradis Former Administrator, Food and Nutrition Service

In 2009 approximately 14 percent, or 17 million American households, were food insecure. At the same time, the U.S. faces an obesity epidemic among both adults and children. Ironically, obesity and hunger do coexist. How does the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service address these problems? What federal programs reduce hunger while promoting better nutrition? Are there new and innovative approaches to these issues? We explored these questions and so much more with Julie Paradis, then administrator of the Food and Nutrition Service, who was a guest on The Business of Government Hour. Ms. Paradis offered her insights on the important mission and work of FNS.

Editor's note: Since this conversation, Ms. Paradis has retired from public service. We wish her all the best.

Julie, I'd like to start off by learning more about USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. Would you give us an overview of the history, mission, and evolution of the FNS?

— Julie Paradis —

Its mission is just so noble: to increase food security among the American public and to reduce hunger. It seeks to provide children and low-income people access to food, to a healthy diet, and nutrition education. This is done in a manner that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence.

The primary responsibility of the FNS is to oversee the administration of the nation's 15 nutrition assistance programs. These programs touch the lives of one in four over the course of a year, so our mission is very important, very critical to the food security of our nation. It's at the forefront of ending hunger and improving the nutrition and health of low-income kids and families all across the country. [As of December 2010] FNS staff totaled 1,300 with 500 located at headquarters and about 800 staff working out of seven regional offices ... In FY 2010, the federal government spent over \$90 billion to fund the 15 nutrition assistance programs, which represented more than 60 percent of total USDA expenditures.



Julie, what were some key challenges you faced in your role as administrator and how did you address these challenges?

— Julie Paradis —

Secretary Vilsack has a number of priorities. He wants to make sure that America's children have access to safe, nutritious, and balanced meals—this goes to the core mission of the Food and Nutrition Service. The Secretary also wants to make sure that rural communities have the available means to create wealth, to be self-sustaining, repopulate, and thrive economically. One of President Obama's top priorities in this area is his initiative to end childhood hunger by 2015. The First Lady also has [an] initiative to end childhood obesity within a generation.

It [was] a huge task just to run our 15 nutrition assistance programs, but one of the real challenges was to find the right

balance between these new initiatives and ... established programs ... The other [really difficult] thing involves budget constraints. We all know what 2011 is going to bring with a long-term continuing resolution and prospects for 2012 don't look much better. [In the end], I [was] trying to get more done with fewer people than ever before while also trying to find ways to squeeze inefficiencies out of our processes. It was a very great challenge and it kept us very busy.

Julie, what about enhancements to child nutrition programs? What is being done to improve access, the standard of nutritional food, and new strategies for reducing hunger and improving food choices for children?

— Julie Paradis —

Well, I'm so glad you asked because we are very, very excited that the Congress has recently passed a major piece of legislation, The Child Nutrition Reauthorization, it's called the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. It will allow us for the first time in over 30 years to make real reforms to the school lunch and breakfast programs by really improving the critical nutrition and hunger safety net for millions and millions of kids. This act includes a number of provisions that are really quite historic. FNS is going to be able to actually upgrade the nutritional standards for school meals. There are going to be additional federal funds to reimburse schools; we were going to increase the reimbursement rate for school lunches by six cents for districts who comply with federal nutrition standards. Now, I know that doesn't sound like a lot, six cents per meal, but if you talk to the folks who prepare these foods, they're very excited about that six-cent increase. It's the first real reimbursement rate increase that we've had in this program for over 30 years.

The Secretary of Agriculture has been given the authority to improve the nutritional quality of virtually all foods sold in schools. USDA will be able to set nutritional standards for foods that are in vending machines, on the à la carte lines, and sold in school stores. This goes well beyond the traditional school lunch. We're going to be able to increase the number of eligible kids enrolled in the school meal programs by using Medicaid data to directly certify kids to receive school meals. They won't have to fill out additional applications. We're also going to find ways to eliminate the paper applications in communities that have high levels of poverty. This will increase the opportunities for kids to get the free and reduced-price meals. There is also the Healthier U.S. School Challenge, which actually sets a number of very difficult criteria for nutrition education, physical activity, and what is being served in schools. If schools meet these



School children pick up their lunches from the cafeteria at the Normandie Avenue Elementary School in South Central Los Angeles after the passage in Congress of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.

criteria, then they get an award. It's just another example of this administration's commitment to making sure that kids are not only eating, but that they're eating well.

Julie, in 2009, I understand that approximately 14 percent or 17 million households were food insecure. At the same time we face an obesity epidemic among not only adults but children as well. As unbelievable as it may seem, obesity and hunger do coexist; would you explain this seemingly paradoxical reality, and what are the causes that have led to the situation?

— Julie Paradis —

A number of studies have suggested a possible correlation between food insecurity and obesity. What we call nutrient-poor foods, energy-dense foods cost less, and so that promotes an over-consumption of calories leading to

weight gain. To maintain adequate energy intake, people who have to limit their food costs may select lower quality diets consisting of high-energy and inexpensive foods. People eat fewer fruits and vegetables, we know, as food insecurity worsens. I think the general assumption is that typically fruits and vegetables are more expensive, and so more out of reach of low-income households, but if you shop carefully and you know what you're looking for, you really can feed your family well on a tight budget. We haven't done a very good job of explaining that to people. I think there's a lot of work that needs to be done.

Julie, FNS administers 15 nutrition assistance programs; would you specifically outline the role states play in delivering these programs, and how they work with the agency to manage and distribute the benefits?

— Julie Paradis —

FNS couldn't do it without our state partners. For example, in our SNAP program ... state-paid caseworkers actually take the applications ... and make eligibility determinations and then work with those recipients to get the SNAP benefits that they can then use at their grocery store. Regarding the school meals programs, there's a state agency that's responsible for making sure that all of those school cafeterias are getting the funding that they need to be able to put together nutritious meals and serve those kids. We have The Child and Adult Care Feeding program that provides federal reimbursement for meals that are served in daycare centers, childcare centers, and family day care centers that serve low-income children.



I think of the FNS staff at the top of a pyramid, a grand pyramid of probably hundreds of thousands of people that are ultimately responsible for distributing benefits. It's an enormous task. FNS's regional offices actually do the hand-to-hand work with the state agencies while ... headquarters focuses more on policy; it's a fine-tuned machine that at the end of the day serves one in four Americans and serves them very well.

Julie, you've mentioned a couple of times in our conversation SNAP. Would you tell us more about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program? What are some of the critical challenges facing this program?

— Julie Paradis —

This program was authorized in 1961, but it actually goes all the way back to the '30s. It was a Depression-era program that actually did provide food stamps to low-income households. It now serves almost 43 million people. In the last 36 months, FNS has seen an absolutely amazing increase in participation, largely as a result of the economic downturn. SNAP had 23 consecutive months of historic highs, so what it really does prove is that this program is doing exactly what it's intended to do. It's countercyclical—as the economy is challenged and more people are struggling to feed their families, this program is there for them. It's a mandatory entitlement; we don't have to worry about going to Congress to get more funds ... Over the course of its history, as the economy gets better SNAP participation goes down. It's a great program; it's the fundamental, primary safety-net program that we have. We call it also [our] largest child nutrition program because 50 percent of the people in SNAP are kids.



The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the new name of the Federal Food Stamp Program as of October 1, 2008. The new name reflects the changes we've made to meet the needs of our clients, including a focus on nutrition and improvements in accessibility. SNAP is the federal name for the program; some State programs may have a different name.



New policies as a result of the Farm Bill improve access to meet the needs of our clients:

- Minimum monthly benefit increased to \$14 and indexed to inflation.
- Minimum standard deduction increased to \$144 and indexed to inflation.
- Retirement and education accounts are no longer considered countable resources.
- All dependent care costs (child care and care for elderly or disabled household members) are now considered when determining eligibility and benefit amount.

Did You Know...

- Current clients do not need to fill out any extra paperwork as a result of the Program name change.
- Nutrition education is available to help clients learn to make healthy eating and active lifestyle choices.
- Children automatically qualify for free school breakfast and lunch when they receive SNAP benefits. Some participants may qualify for WIC benefits.
- EBT cards, which are similar to debit cards, can be used in approximately 171,000 authorized retail stores nationwide.
- SNAP is good for communities. Every \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates nearly twice as much (\$9.20) in total community spending.

Source: USDA, September 2008

Can you tell us how the states have been dealing with these higher applications and increasing caseloads while facing the significant budget reductions?

— Julie Paradis —

You're absolutely right; it is a huge challenge. FNS is working very hard with states to help them find more efficient ways of doing things, more effective ways of doing things. FNS staff truly understands the workload and management challenges that are faced by states and local jurisdictions today. The agency is trying very hard to provide some administrative relief—take a little bit of the burden off the caseworkers, for example, because their caseloads have just grown so dramatically. The agency is anxious to approve waivers to make programs easier for people to apply. FNS also has the State Exchange Funds; it is a small pot of money that can be shared with states. For example, if a state is really challenged and knows that a neighboring state or another state is doing a particularly good job in one way or another, FNS can actually fund those state personnel to go to a model state. We can fund a model state to go to a state that is challenged, and these state exchange funds have made a great deal of

difference. What's really wonderful about this program is that the states really do ... learn from each other ... Finally, [during my tenure as administrator] FNS worked with states on business process reengineering. There are some states that do an extraordinary job meeting demand with decreased staff, and they do it with great accuracy. FNS is sharing lessons learned from the states that have instituted very effective business process reengineering with other states.

You know, there's always the silver lining when you go through these kinds of challenges. I think when we get on the other side of this downturn in the economy, this program will be stronger and more efficient than it's ever been before.

Given your wealth of experience, what are the characteristics that make up an effective leader, and more importantly, who along your career has influenced your leadership and management approach?

— Julie Paradis —

I'm not thin-skinned and have a pretty good sense of self. I think that helps if you're going to try to lead people—you

have to have a strong sense of self. My dad taught me that it is important to do the right thing, to make a real commitment to doing things properly, doing things well, doing things right, and so I try hard not to play games, and to really think through what is the right thing to do in any given situation and somehow find a way to do that.

I've learned some things from the people that I've worked with over the years. When Charlie Stenholm was in Congress and I was supporting him, he was always one of the most optimistic and positive people. He taught me a great deal about inclusion—you don't just work with your friends, you've got to reach out to the folks who challenge you and have a different view of things. The Under Secretary that I worked for when I was in the Clinton administration, a wonderful woman, Shirley Watkins, taught me the benefit of perseverance. She would frequently say, "Julie, we're going to try this, and if we can't get in the front door on this one, we'll go in the back door; we'll see if we can find a window open, or we'll go in through the basement door. But, you know, we're going to persevere, and we're going to find a way to make this policy different." I am not easily discouraged. I am optimistic. I am ever so grateful for the people that I've learned from over the course of my career.

Julie, what advice would you give to someone considering a career in public service?

— Julie Paradis —

FNS celebrated its 40th anniversary in the summer of 2009. I am greatly encouraged that between 2008 and 2009, [when] poverty numbers increased, unemployment increased ... the percentage of people who were hungry did not go up. In 2009, 14.7 percent of households in the United States were food insecure; that's essentially unchanged from the 14.6 percent in 2008. The fact that we didn't have a higher percentage of hungry households when all the other indicators were going up ... is a tribute to FNS programs. It is a huge success that we were able to meet the needs of hungry people and keep those food security numbers level at a time of such dire need. I feel just so honored and blessed to [have been], not only working with amazing programs, but with amazing people who have worked so hard putting their noses to the grindstone under very difficult circumstances to make sure that these programs are doing what they're supposed to do; it's a great tribute.



It's an honor to be a public servant. My mom and my dad were in the Marine Corps. I [learned] what it meant to be a public servant and to serve the American people. It's been a great privilege and an honor for me. I highly recommend public service. ■

To learn more about the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, go to www.fns.usda.gov/fns



To hear *The Business of Government Hour's* interview with Julie Paradis, go to the Center's website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



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