



Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program

*Informing Evidence-Based Policy Decisions that
Prevent Child Hunger and Promote Children's Health*

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Contact: Dr. Deborah A. Frank (w) 617-414-5252
(pager) 888-245-5724
Nicole Neault 617-638-5850

LEADING PEDIATRIC RESEARCHER WARNS CONGRESS THAT NEW WELFARE WORK REQUIREMENTS WILL PUT MORE CHILDREN AT RISK *National Research Presented at Ways and Means Subcommittee Hearing*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – A leading pediatric researcher warned Congress today that imposing tougher work requirements and cutting benefits for welfare recipients will put more low-income children at “grave” risk of going hungry or not receiving adequate nutrition.

In testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee’s Subcommittee on Human Resources, Dr. Deborah A. Frank of Boston University’s School of Medicine summarized long-term, national research showing that children of parents given welfare “sanctions” (cuts in financial support because of inability to comply with program work requirement or other regulations) are 50 percent more likely to suffer from “food insecurity.” Copies of Dr. Frank’s testimony are available at: www.c-snap.org

The federal government defines “food insecurity” to mean that a person has a limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

This lack of an adequate diet impairs the body’s ability to battle infections and can lead to health problems for young children severe enough to increase the risk of hospitalization, Dr. Frank said.

Dr. Frank testified that work requirements might benefit some children of parents who have sufficient supports and skills to find and keep adequately paid work.

“However,” she added, “many more families, particularly those with young or chronically ill children, or with parents burdened with poor mental and physical health, cognitive impairments, or sequelae of physical and sexual abuse will lose all income for their survival needs.”

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C-SNAP

Phone:
617-638-5850
Fax:
617-638-5066
Email:
nneault@bu.edu

www.c-snap.org

The subcommittee is considering reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. That legislation repealed individual entitlements to cash welfare benefits, replacing them with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant program. The program's goals include moving parents off welfare and into the workforce.

Unlike current law, which allows state flexibility, HR 240, which is being considered in the House of Representatives, mandates that, nationally, all family members, including children, will lose cash assistance if parents are unable to meet work requirements. The welfare law was scheduled to expire in 2002 and has been continued through temporary reauthorizations the last two years.

Dr. Frank urged the subcommittee to mandate that authorities review the health status of children whose parents might incur sanctions.

"I cannot imagine that the distinguished members of this committee really intend to make America's babies hungrier and sicker," Dr. Frank testified. "You now know the medical data that demonstrate declining welfare caseloads do not automatically indicate an improvement in the well-being of American children. On the contrary, families who leave welfare because of sanctions or who have their benefits reduced before they have reached family stability are more likely to have hungry, sick children."

Dr. Frank is professor of pediatrics at the Boston University School of Medicine and director of the Growth and Development Program at Boston Medical Center, which treats 150 to 200 malnourished young children a year. She is also a Principal Investigator in the Children's Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, which has been funded by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and other private donors.

Since 1998, this pediatric research team has monitored the impact of public policies and economic conditions on the nutritional and health status of thousands of young, low-income children in medical institutions in Baltimore, Boston, Little Rock, Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Washington DC. A new site in Philadelphia has recently joined the research network.

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