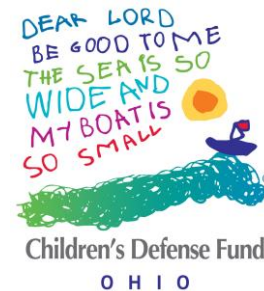


**Ashon McKenzie, Policy Director  
Children's Defense Fund-Ohio,  
Testimony in Support of HB 80  
House Education & Career Readiness Committee,  
March 14, 2017**



Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, Ranking Minority Member Fedor, and members of the Education and Career Readiness Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Ashon McKenzie and I am the Policy Director at Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. I am here today to offer support for House Bill 80, sponsored by Representative LaTourette and Representative Smith.

First allow me to share a brief introduction of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. CDF-Ohio is a statewide non-profit organization which serves as an independent voice for all children. We work to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure quality education as well as appropriate and targeted access to resources to meet children's health and nutrition needs.

We urge your support of HB 80 because it will expand access to nutritious meals for Ohio's children when school is not in session.

HB 80 provides an opportunity to support school districts that need summer food programs, but cannot afford to extend their school lunch or school breakfast programs into the summer. Under current law, school districts that provide summer academic intervention services are required to extend their school breakfast program or school lunch program or to establish a summer food service program. Because districts can opt out if they do not have the funds to operate a summer feeding site, we are not meeting current student needs. HB 80 allows an approved summer food service program sponsor to provide vital meal programs using a school's facilities. This move will expand food access in our state for our most vulnerable children.

Nearly one in four Ohio children suffer from food insecurity. During the school year, many of these children rely on at least one meal each day through the free and reduced school breakfast and lunch program. But when the school year ends, access to these meals also ends.

According to a recent report from the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) more than 75% of eligible Ohio children regularly eat a school meal. But the rate drops dramatically in the summer months from over 75% during the school year, to about 11% in the summer. These children are left in challenging positions to find food for themselves or go hungry.

Schools are typically central locations in a community and ideal locations for a summer meals programs. According to the Ohio Department of Education, however, schools account for only about 230 or close to 13% of the more than 1,800 open meal sites.

CDF-Ohio has a commitment to the Appalachian region. In fact, last May we released a comprehensive report of the status of children in the region. Through our focus on child poverty and hunger, we found that eight Appalachian counties did not have any summer feeding sites (Brown, Carroll, Guernsey, Harrison, Holmes, Monroe, Noble, and Vinton), and seven counties had fewer than five sites (Adams, Belmont, Clermont, Coshocton, Highland, Morgan, and Tuscarawas). Collectively, these 15 counties share over a third (36.9%) of Ohio's Appalachian children, yet only 6% of the region's feeding sites. HB 80 would increase Appalachian children's access to summer food.

Through our research on child hunger needs throughout the state, we encountered the story of Bryce from Marion County. Bryce was just six-year-old at the time. He was traveling a long distance to a summer meal site. However, his younger sister Sarah, who was only three years old, could not take the trip with him. When the director of Bryce's feeding program found Bryce digging through the garbage, she learned that Bryce was looking for leftovers to bring home to Sarah. Although the center sent a care package home to Sarah, it was only a temporary solution aimed at a single child. Expanding access to summer meals programs through HB 80 could help children like Sarah and Bryce.

Children that suffer from food insecurity are at a greater risk for chronic health conditions. Food insecure elementary children are four times more likely to need mental health counseling. Child malnutrition is linked to higher rates of adult diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and anxiety.

Summer meals sites coupled with educational activities are a valuable way to meet children's needs. Data show that students can lose months of academic progress during the summer. By combining learning opportunities and food access, children keep hunger and learning loss at bay. The programs also provide a safe supervised space for children through the summer months.

Children's Defense Fund-Ohio supports the passage of HB 80 with the hope that the measure will move in time to reach Ohio's hungry children this summer. Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.