

## Key Lessons from the Healthy Kids, Healthy Future Webinar: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Policy

### Presenters:

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The Healthy Kids, Healthy Future: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood webinar series explores how to leverage early care and education settings to achieve equitable health outcomes by highlighting opportunities and advances in policy, research, philanthropy, and innovation. Access a [recording of the webinar](#) and review [speaker slides](#). This is a synopsis of the webinar on policy.

Early care and education (ECE) is an important setting for promoting equitable health outcomes in early childhood by utilizing best practices in healthy eating and physical activity and participating in child nutrition programs that promote food security. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated equity and food security challenges, however, there are opportunities to take the lessons learned during the COVID-19 emergency as well as current interest in helping ECE systems recover to better serve young children and families.

### Policy opportunities to advance food security and childhood obesity prevention

- **Extend and make permanent the federal nutrition program flexibilities and increases in benefits enacted during the COVID-19 emergency**

During the height of the pandemic, waivers issued for federal nutrition programs resulted in expanded program access, more dollars going to participating families, and an increase in equitable access to benefits. For example, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) permitted all ECE providers to access higher meal reimbursement rates, which may have enabled more ECE programs in rural and suburban communities to participate in the program, promoting more equitable access to the benefits. In addition, participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) received increased fruit and vegetable benefits which expanded their access to healthy foods via enhanced purchasing power and led to many stores offering a greater volume and variety of healthy foods in under-resourced communities. An increase in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit amount also helped families as food insecurity rates rose during the COVID-19 pandemic. Making these changes permanent could improve food security and access to healthy foods for young children and families over the long term, supporting better health outcomes.

- **Pursue sustainable systems change**

Supporting states in adopting licensing and quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) that include both requirements and incentives to integrate high-impact healthy eating and physical activity best practices into ECE programs can positively impact the health and wellbeing of many children and families. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention promotes sustainable policy change within ECE programs by helping providers implement evidence-based obesity prevention interventions and supporting requirements and

incentives for ECE providers to complete professional development focused on nutrition, physical activity and obesity prevention. Embedding best practices in licensing, incentives, and professional development standards can help ensure sustainability in ECE systems.

- **Diversify and build advocacy capacity at state and local levels to support adoption of ECE policies and practices promoting child health and equity**

Creating broad and diverse coalitions with cross-sector partners, such as the business community, can help to build support for policies that promote the health and wellbeing of young children and families, such as including obesity prevention best practices in ECE licensing requirements or securing increased funding to expand access to high quality ECE programs for families with low-incomes. Broad coalitions can also advance policies and support programs that promote overall child and family wellbeing, such as extending post-partum Medicaid coverage, ensuring access to federal nutrition assistance programs, and securing additional family income supports. The upcoming White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health also presents an opportunity to highlight successful food security and child nutrition solutions in the ECE sector that may lead to innovative policy solutions.

## Policy opportunities to overcome barriers to addressing food security and obesity prevention

- **Eliminate excessive administrative burdens for ECE centers to participate in federal programs**

Reducing the paperwork required for ECE programs to enroll in federal nutrition programs, such as CACFP, would improve access to these programs in some of the most under-resourced communities where ECE centers often lack staffing capacity to complete the enrollment process. Balancing compliance requirements with flexibility can also better engage many ECE providers who do not currently participate in CACFP out of concern of the consequences for paperwork errors.

- **Align and streamline the various systems serving young children and families with low-incomes**

Streamlining enrollment processes for programs with similar eligibility requirements can make it easier for families to learn about and access a variety of programs and services, and potentially increase participation. Entities such as children's cabinets at the local, state, and federal levels can improve coordination and alignment across systems to decrease administrative burdens for families and help them more easily access services. Whole Child Health models and legislation to help link health care and social services are other tools for addressing the holistic health and social needs of children and families by using innovative payment models or grants to facilitate cross-sector collaboration.

- **Pair program evaluation and surveillance data with personal stories to show the importance of investing funding and resources to leverage ECE settings to promote food security and obesity prevention**

High quality evaluation and surveillance data is important for demonstrating the long-term impacts and cost benefits of utilizing food security and obesity prevention interventions in ECE settings. Translating research into clear, concise messages presented alongside the lived experience of people served by the programs discussed above can make the research more relatable and impactful for policymakers. This is vital to advancing health equity in the areas of nutrition, weight, and food security.