



**Testimony of Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson, President and CEO  
Children's Defense Fund**

**Before the  
House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis  
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Recognizing and Building on the Success of Pandemic Relief Programs**

**Wednesday, September 22, 2021**

**2:00 pm**

## **Opening**

Good afternoon, Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise, and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for this invitation to testify on federal efforts to help Black and brown children during the pandemic. Let me also thank and acknowledge the other distinguished panelists here with us today.

I am honored to offer testimony on behalf of the Children's Defense Fund, of which I am the President and CEO. The Children's Defense Fund has been advocating for children, especially low-income Black and brown children, for almost 50 years. Our national office is based in Washington, D.C., and we also have offices in California, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, the Southern Region, and Texas, in addition to over 100 Freedom Schools programs in twenty-five states across the nation helping to empower youth through afterschool and enrichment programs. Our unique model focuses on supporting families through the passage of progressive laws, implementation of rules, robust programs, community-building, and services all aligned to advance child well-being in America. We envision a nation where marginalized children flourish, leaders prioritize their well-being, and communities wield the power to ensure they thrive.

My testimony today will cover three very timely and important topics on how the pandemic has deeply affected Black and brown children and families and how, through the support of COVID-relief legislation, we've seen them succeed, and what Congress must do to help our children and youth in the future.

## **The COVID-19 pandemic has hit families with children particularly hard.**

It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the systemic inequality and structural and historical racism that permeates our country. COVID-19 has laid bare what many of us have known for a long time: persistent disinvestment in our Black, brown, indigenous, and immigrant communities left us unprepared to deal with the economic, social, and racial fallout from a national crisis. Black, brown, and indigenous families were more likely to lose their jobs and livelihoods, contract the virus, be hospitalized, and die because of COVID-19. A year and half into the pandemic, our communities continue to struggle to put food on the table, keep a roof over their head, and meet their basic needs.

Early last year, as COVID-19 began community spread across the country, I lived in St. Louis, Missouri and led a church-related, child advocacy organization. As schools went remote and young people wrestled with dislocation and isolations, food lines five miles long became a common Saturday, morning occurrence. While children sat in families' cars in those lines they also said good-bye to loving mothers, grandmother, aunts and uncles lost to the virus. It was especially hard for Black children already challenged by a spike in suicide rates because even in

our region and state where the largest employers are health care companies, inequity in access meant more Black people died. In fact, for more than a month, the people to die from contracting COVID-19 in our city were Black people.<sup>1</sup>

Our nation must confront the twin crises of COVID-19 and racial inequity by reconstructing our economic and political systems. Building back better requires ensuring that our children and youth always have what they need to thrive.

Right now, that isn't the case—the recent U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) Official Poverty Measure (OPM) released last week show that more than 11.6 million children—nearly 1 in 6—lived in poverty in 2020.<sup>2</sup> This represents the first increase in child poverty in many years.

At the same time, thanks to tools like the Supplemental Poverty Measure—we know what works to lift families out of poverty. We see through stories from our field and real data that critical expansions to anti-poverty programs made as part of the temporary, COVID-relief measures effectively reduced hardship, particularly programs like the Child Tax Credit (CTC).

### **Children need a guaranteed income.**

The pandemic has highlighted families' need for regular, reliable, and adequate income to cover the costs associated with raising children—from food to housing, clothes, school supplies, and other basic necessities. While so many families lost income and their livelihoods over the past year and a half, the cost of raising children remained stubbornly high. Federal estimates show the monthly cost of raising a child—including housing, food, clothing, health care, childcare, and education, among other things—ranges between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a month.<sup>3</sup>

However, thanks to the Biden Administration and Congress's support in the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), families are getting some of the help they need. ARPA ushered in a historic, one-year expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) to help more children and families afford the everyday expenses of raising children. The bill boosted the value of the credit from \$2,000 to \$3,000 or \$3,600 per child paid in monthly payments and extended the credit to the more than 23

---

<sup>1</sup> [St. Louis health director: 'All 12 COVID-19 deaths' in St. Louis have been black | TheHill](#)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey. 2021. "2020 Annual Social and Economic Supplement," Table POV-01 (Below 100 percent, all races). <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pov.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Lino, Mark, Kevin Kuczynski, Nestor Rodriguez, TusaRebeca Schap. "Expenditures on Children by Families, 2015." U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2017. [https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/crc2015\\_March2017\\_0.pdf](https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/crc2015_March2017_0.pdf)

million children —predominantly Black and Latinx children—who were previously left out because their parents made too little to qualify.<sup>4</sup>

Correcting the wrongful exclusion of the lowest income families or even families with no income—basically by removing a work requirement —was a critical step toward making this policy advance racial justice. The expanded CTC in ARPA is projected to lift more than four million children out of poverty, cut deep poverty in half, and begin to close racial income disparities.<sup>5</sup> The expanded CTC is projected to **cut poverty for Black children by 52 percent, Hispanic children by 45 percent, Indigenous children by 61 percent, and Asian-American & Pacific Islander Children by 37 percent.**<sup>6</sup>

The first monthly CTC payments arrived in July, and we can already see how the CTC is immensely improving child well-being. In its first month on the books, the expanded CTC reduced food insecurity by more than 30 percent and kept 3 million children from living in poverty.<sup>7</sup>

In its first few months, this program has been a lifeline for so many, and I just want to highlight a few stories that families across the country have shared with us about how important this monthly check is to them:

- “The monthly payment means not having to pick up extra shifts, and more time with family.”
- “It would mean emotional relief knowing that I don’t have to worry about feeding and providing basic essentials for my children.”
- “It’s going to give my son a chance to participate in extracurricular activities that he otherwise would not be able to do so at this time.”

In addition to hearing these stories, which are incredibly powerful, we’ve seen families take to the streets, organize, and get the word out about the importance of signing up for this benefit and ensuring every eligible family can get their credit. In July, ahead of the first CTC payment, we

---

<sup>4</sup> Collyer, Sophie, Christopher Wimer, and David Harris. “Earnings Requirements, Benefit Values, and Child Poverty under the Child Tax Credit.” Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy. 2019. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5743308460b5e922a25a6dc7/t/5c7fe48b1905f46e1214bc42/1551885452114/Poverty+%26+Social+Policy+Brief+3\\_3.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5743308460b5e922a25a6dc7/t/5c7fe48b1905f46e1214bc42/1551885452114/Poverty+%26+Social+Policy+Brief+3_3.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Acs, Gregory and Kevin Werner. “How a Permanent Expansion of the Child Tax Credit Could Affect Poverty.” Urban Institute. 2021. [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104626/how-a-permanent-expansion-of-the-child-tax-credit-could-affect-poverty\\_1.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104626/how-a-permanent-expansion-of-the-child-tax-credit-could-affect-poverty_1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> “A Poverty Reduction Analysis of the American Family Act.” Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy. 2021. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5743308460b5e922a25a6dc7/t/600f2123fdfa730101a4426a/1611604260458/Poverty-Reduction-Analysis-American-Family-Act-CPSP-2020.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Parolin, Zachary, Elizabeth Ananat, Sophie Collyer, Megan Curran, and Christopher Wimer. “The Initial Effects of the Expanded Child Tax Credit on Material Hardship.” Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy. 2021. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5743308460b5e922a25a6dc7/t/61325c40d3bab90b2be87083/1630690372639/Child-Tax-Credit-Expansion-on-Material-Hardship-CPSP-2021.pdf>

had the pleasure of having one of our DC DMV Freedom Schools parents attend a White House event with her children to talk about what the CTC means for them. Stories like these that center people who are most impacted by these policy changes remind us of most of all that we *can* make a difference in the lives of the people we serve.

***The CTC must be made permanent.***

Since the passage of ARPA, the Children’s Defense Fund has demanded a permanent expansion of CTC in the next reconciliation package. A permanent CTC expansion is an essential step toward fulfilling our obligation to our children—to ensure they have what they need to flourish, no matter their race or ethnicity, immigration status, or zip code. For decades, women and families have fought for this moment—from the Black feminist leaders of the welfare rights movement who launched the fight for a guaranteed minimum income more than 50 years ago, to the untold number of parents who have spoken out during the pandemic to demand that their caregiving work be recognized and valued.

The *Build Back Better Act*, which was approved by the House Ways and Means Committee just last week, approved a plan to extend and build upon the one-year CTC expansion through 2025; the plan makes full refundability permanent for the lowest income families, allows immigrant children with Tax Identification Numbers (ITINs) to qualify, and makes many other improvements to move the program closer to a true, monthly child allowance program that responds to the reality of families’ lives.

Congress must pass this CTC expansion immediately; the draft bill cannot be weakened or undermined by reinstating work requirements, shrinking the cash benefit, or cutting years off the extension. We must also keep fighting to ensure the expanded CTC is made permanent and fully inclusive for all children because we can’t afford to leave the fate of this program to be decided in an uncertain political future.

**Expanding free school meals to all children will help our youth flourish.**

In a typical school year, children’s back-to-school worries might be picking the perfect outfit, remembering a locker combination, or finding a seat in the cafeteria. But over the last year and a half, in the wake of COVID-19, millions of children have had bigger worries on their minds, including where their next meal will come from—or whether it will come at all.

That’s because the pandemic has exacerbated child hunger and demonstrated the importance and impact of a universal school meals program for all children. One where every child has a free meal, regardless of income, eligibility, or zip code.

At the Children’s Defense Fund, we envision our child nutrition programs reaching and feeding all children, but particularly for our Black, brown, and Indigenous children who face systemic barriers to food access. We have made important strides towards expanding access and eligibility in the wake of the pandemic, and we must build upon this progress and do everything in our power to keep children fed at all times—not just times of global crisis.

For families like Tawanda Johnson’s, these flexibilities have been a critical lifeline. Tawanda’s two oldest daughters attend different charter schools in Washington, D.C, but thanks to the waivers, they have been able to collect meals at a single public school in their neighborhood instead of driving to multiple sites across the city. As Tawanda told reporters with the Washington Post, “These meals really help me and my family...I’m so grateful.”<sup>8</sup>

***Short Term: extending waiver authority to allow COVID-19 flexibilities to continue for our children.***

Thanks to Congress and the administration, in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, along with the Continuing Resolution (CR) last year, the USDA was given waiver authority to help schools feed children safely, conveniently, and remotely. Schools were then allowed to adapt as needed to reach and feed children during school closures and hybrid learning. These flexibilities have meant children were able to access meals at no charge and at times and locations most convenient for them. Without action, however, this waiver authority will soon expire, and USDA will no longer have tools to respond as the pandemic persists and evolves. We are up against a ticking clock, and Congress must extend this waiver authority before the end of this month to ensure USDA can continue offering schools and communities the flexibility they need to meet children where they are.

These waivers have allowed schools to serve over 3.2 billion healthy meals free of charge to more than 22 million children<sup>9</sup>—more than half of whom are children of color.<sup>10</sup> If USDA’s waiver authority expires at the end of the month, USDA will not be able to renew these waivers or allow schools to continue serving meals remotely—even if the pandemic worsens or persists beyond the Spring. This could leave millions of Black, Hispanic

---

<sup>8</sup> Stein, Perry and Hannah Natanson. 2020. “School leaders fear that stricter lunch program eligibility in the fall could make it harder for students to eat.” *Washington Post*, August 25. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/school-leaders-fear-that-stricter-lunch-program-eligibility-in-the-fall-could-make-it-harder-for-students-to-eat/2020/08/25/e26e5414-e268-11ea-8dd2-d07812bf00f7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/school-leaders-fear-that-stricter-lunch-program-eligibility-in-the-fall-could-make-it-harder-for-students-to-eat/2020/08/25/e26e5414-e268-11ea-8dd2-d07812bf00f7_story.html).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2021. Child Nutrition Tables, National Level Annual Summary Tables: FY 1969-2020. “National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served.” <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/slsummar-9.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. 2020. “Table 216.60. Number and percentage distribution of public school students, by percentage of students in school who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, school level, locale, and student race/ethnicity: Fall 2018.” [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20\\_216.60.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_216.60.asp).

and Indigenous children without nutritious food next year and exacerbate racial disparities in health and educational outcomes.

Unfortunately, we know the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. Families continue to need support, and school nutrition departments and community sponsors are struggling to operate. So, Congress must extend USDA's waiver authority before it expires on September 30, 2021 to ensure that all children maintain access to healthy meals.

### ***Long-term: Universal school meals for all***

As I mentioned earlier, the pandemic has allowed schools to serve meals to all children free of charge. Maintaining free universal school meals for all after the pandemic ends is essential for advancing economic and racial justice, improving child well-being and educational outcomes, and reducing costs and paperwork for schools and communities.

Multiple studies show access to healthy school meals for all improves students' attendance,<sup>11</sup> academic performance,<sup>12</sup> and health outcomes<sup>13</sup> while reducing stigma and lunch-shaming. Free meals have been found to reduce behavior-related suspensions,<sup>14</sup> which play a key role in the Cradle to Prison Pipeline™ that disproportionately funnels Black and brown youth from the schoolhouse to the jailhouse.

Providing free meals to all children will also reduce the financial strain on families, particularly those currently making too much to qualify for free meals but not enough to get by. When surveyed, 98 percent of school staff reported that universal meals reduced financial stress for students and families.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, switching from strict eligibility to a healthy school meals model will streamline operations for schools—eliminating paperwork, reducing administrative burdens, and cutting costs. Evidence from the pandemic shows medium and large schools offering healthy school meals under temporary USDA waivers are saving money without sacrificing meal quality.

---

<sup>11</sup> Murphy, Michael. 2007. "Breakfast and Learning: An Updated Review." *Current Nutrition & Food Science* 3(1): 3-36. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584\\_Breakfast\\_and\\_Learning\\_An\\_Updated\\_Review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584_Breakfast_and_Learning_An_Updated_Review).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Davis, Will and Tareena Musaddiq. 2018. "Estimating the Effects of Subsidized School Meals on Child Health: Evidence from the Community Eligibility Provision in Georgia Schools." [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ad910ec365f02f74f353357/t/5aec97feaa4a99fc541bc0eb/1525454848660/Davis\\_Musaddiq\\_2018.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ad910ec365f02f74f353357/t/5aec97feaa4a99fc541bc0eb/1525454848660/Davis_Musaddiq_2018.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Gordon, Nora E. and Krista J. Ruffini. 2018. "School Nutrition and Student Discipline: The Effects of School Wide Free Meals." National Bureau of Economic Research. [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w24986/w24986.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w24986/w24986.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, Josiah, Bernice Garnett, M. Anore Horton, and Ginger Farineau. 2020. "Universal Free School Meal Programs in Vermont Show Multi-domain Benefits," Table 2. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 15(6):1-14. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/586e858220099e929f5eca70/t/5d8bd016597be3780c87aaf3/1569443863696/USM\\_VT\\_2017Research\\_Paper.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/586e858220099e929f5eca70/t/5d8bd016597be3780c87aaf3/1569443863696/USM_VT_2017Research_Paper.pdf).

About 10.8 million children fall just above the cutoff for free school meals, living in households earning too much to qualify for free meals but too little to get by.<sup>16</sup> The vast majority – about 58 percent - are children of color, who already face systemic and structural barriers to accessing healthy food.<sup>17</sup>

The *Build Back Better Act*, passed out of the House Education and Labor Committee last week, included provisions that get us one step closer to serving free school meals for all children -- it allows an additional 9 million children to receive free school meals by expanding eligibility under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and dramatically expands the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) program.

Congress must pass, and not weaken or undermine these nutrition investments, and in the long-term – we will keep fighting for a universal meal program because children should never have to prove they are worthy of nutritious food and schools should never have to go broke to serve them.

### **Older Youth from Foster Care Need More Support and More Time.**

In the best of times, we do not care well enough for youth who age out of the child welfare system. Each year, roughly 20,000 children in foster care reach adulthood without a permanent family and are cut off from the supports of the system. These youth, who are disproportionately Black, face far worse outcomes on account of the system’s inability to prepare them for adulthood. Through no fault of their own, they have an increased risk of poor educational attainment, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and incarceration and most do not have a strong network of support to help them weather difficult times.

When the pandemic struck, these youth saw all their hard-won stability wiped away. In surveys, more than half of youth from foster care reported facing food insecurity.<sup>18</sup> Roughly 65 percent reported seeing their work hours cut or losing their jobs entirely and only 37 percent reported having any family—legal or chosen—to turn to for support. Following a movement led by thousands of foster youth, Congress acted to provide support in the *Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021*, which provided \$400 million for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood to help youth struggling to make ends with financial support for basic needs like food and housing. It also gave crucial flexibilities to the child welfare system

---

<sup>16</sup> Children’s Defense Fund. 2021. “Universal Meals are Essential for Advancing Racial Equity.” [https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Universal-school-meals-infographic\\_citations.pdf](https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Universal-school-meals-infographic_citations.pdf). Analysis based on latest available Census data for households with incomes below 130 and 200 percent of poverty in 2014. See endnote 3 for more details.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> “The Impact of COVID-19 on Youth from Foster Care: A National Poll.” FosterClub. 2020 <https://www.fosterclub.com/sites/default/files/docs/blogs/COVID%20Poll%20Results%20May%2010%202020.pdf>



to care for these youth, including a moratorium on aging out of foster care during the public health emergency.

Unfortunately, the rollout of these resources has been slow, owing to delays in guidance from the Children's Bureau and bureaucracy and technical problems in the states. Many youth have not yet been able to access the critical resources that Congress provided. In a recent survey from the John Burton Advocates for Youth, half of all youth reported housing instability and nearly three in four youth reported high degrees of financial insecurity.<sup>19</sup> Despite this fact, many provisions of the law will expire on September 30 and thousands of youth who are still in a place of instability due to the pandemic will be ejected en masse from the critical services that are keeping them from poverty and homelessness.

Representatives Langevin, Bacon, and Bass have introduced a bill, H.R. 5167, to extend the critical pandemic supports to youth from foster care. The bill would provide further funding for the Chafee program so that funds are available to help youth meet basic needs and would extend the moratorium on aging out of foster and other critical flexibilities that allow young people to continue receiving supports and services. Congress must pass H.R. 5167 and it must do so before September 30, so no child will be sent from foster care into homelessness.

We have a special responsibility to youth who have aged out of foster care. These youth, who are disproportionately Black, are in a precarious situation precisely because the system failed to provide them with the support that it promised when it removed them from their families. Our failure already made these children vulnerable to this pandemic. We cannot abandon them in this time of need.

### **Conclusion**

Congress must support families with children throughout the duration of this crisis and economic downturn to ensure that our children do not face the harms associated with poverty, hunger, and housing insecurity. Furthermore, once the COVID-19 pandemic and economic fallout passes, Congress should adopt permanent measures to ensure children and families are always supported.

Thank you for allowing me to speak today, and I look forward to hearing from members of the committee.

---

<sup>19</sup> "Hanging on by a Thread: The Cumulative Impact of the Pandemic on Youth Who Have Been in Foster Care or Homeless." John Barton Advocates for Youth. 2021 <https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Pandemic-Youth-Survey.pdf>