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Remarks at the “Rides to Wellness” Summit

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Good afternoon. I'm really thrilled to be here and Therese, thank you for inviting me. But I will tell you, you do have fabulous staff. Now, I got here because Enrico and I were at a meeting on a totally separate issue, and I saw Transportation and after the meeting walked over to her and said, "You know, at FNS we have a program and transportation's a major challenge we're facing, trying to feed children during the summer. And we've been trying to get Transportation to the table. Can you help us?"

Well, the next day I had an email, and the email included the names of people and staff and resources. We've had several meetings. Not only have we collaborated, but your staff has come to the table with ideas. And we're working on solutions that we hope will make a difference. And it's important that we work to make a difference in this particular area that I'm going to talk about in a few minutes, which is hunger of children – during the summer, but just year round.

I don't know how many of you are aware that we have about 17 million children each day who go to bed not knowing if they're going to have a meal the next day – who are food insecure. Food insecure is a nice way of saying hunger. Hunger is a health issue. Children who are food insecure have limited access to meals in their homes, and during the school year FNS through its national school lunch program and breakfast program is able to fill that gap. But during the summer, major challenges are faced in not only rural areas, but also in urban areas. And we've worked the last three years to try and close the gap between the 21 million children we feed lunch to, and the 10 million children we feed breakfast to each day – between that and the 3.8 million who are able to access our summer feeding sites. We have a commitment to work to close that gap.

And I'm here today to talk very briefly about how the transportation challenge both has been a challenge, but we've also tried to think through and identify innovative models to help us surround that challenge. As you're talking today, I'm hoping we can figure ways to leverage what you are doing in your communities to what we are doing in the community, and we can collectively ensure that children will have access.

I'd like to acknowledge my terrific staff who is here, Tony Craddock, who will be with you throughout the day. Tony is on our external relations staff and has been the liaison between FNS and Transportation.

As I said, summer is a particular challenge to us, because in 1968 when the Summer Food Act was passed, it was assumed that children would be able to get summer meals at schools. Well, over time, we all know that schools have their own challenge and so summer feeding or school summer programs started to diminish significantly and now we have fewer summer feeding programs than we have ever had in this country. And many of them are what we call closed sites and are only limited to those children whose parents can afford to pay for the children to go to summer school and who can drive them to the summer program. But the other children in that neighborhood where that school may be located who may not have access cannot access that summer program and that feeding program.

That's a closed site program, but congregate site was the way in which congress determined was the best way to administer this program, and as I said, as the world has changed, we have had to find new ways to identify or to create opportunities for congregate site locations throughout the country. We find that children who live a long distance from the sites are getting on bicycles and riding two or three miles on busy highways to get to a summer feeding site. We find that children are walking a mile, mile and a half to get to a summer feeding site. We find the apprehension that parents have about the safety issues that their children face as they are trying to navigate the streets of Chicago or the highways of West Virginia. Parents are concerned about that.

We lack volunteers to coordinate transporting meals to the sites where children may be able to have access that is closer to their location. The costs of driver's salaries and gas and meals and maintenance and all of those challenges seem to get in the way, but our sponsors who work on Summer Feeding Program have approached this as a challenge and not a barrier. They have come together as an opportunity to embrace innovation. And let me give you some examples of the kind of innovation that we have developed.

One is mobile feeding models. So you have a school bus that may be available or you have a church van that may be available, or a community based organization has a van that may be available. That van can be loaded with coolers for shelf-stable foods and taken out to communities where children are located. Remember I said it's congregate, so what happens in a community is a mobile site will start at one place in a county, let's just say, and bring a meal to the children, put down a blanket, play some games, put on the good humor music,

do whatever is necessary to let the children know they're there. They come out, they get the meal, they've covered it up, and then they clean up and then they go to the next site. And it's posted, and we try to put the information out through churches, so that they know where the sites are and when the mobile feeding program will be there - the mobile feeding model. We have the challenges and they've worked around those the kind of supervision that needs to go on, and so quite often parents will come, grandparents will come to the site so that they can help supervise the activities that are going on in that site. Those are our mobile sites.

We have what we call a bus-and-shuttle model, and in that model we move children to the sites. And I want to talk to you about a couple of the shuttle, bus-to-shuttle, call-to-ride. In Effingham County, Illinois, children call the West Side High School, register for the program at that site, indicate the days that they will attend and receive free rides to the school through the county public transportation system. In Huntsville, Alabama, the city provides children and parents free shuttle rides to and from summer sites. During the final weeks of school children are given bus passes and are told when they need to meet so that they can be shuttled to those summer sites. Huntsville partners with the Huntsville Shuttle Service and the local transportation service to identify and map the areas and sites where children can locate.

One of the things that we've been thinking about is if vans are moving individuals that are parents to a health program or a health appointment, is there a way to incorporate into that a feeding opportunity for the child who is accompanying the parent, and we're looking at models like that. Arkansas - anybody here from Arkansas? Arkansas has been very creative in thinking about how their clinics and hospitals, when parents are appearing for appointments or when the child is appearing for appointments to be able to ensure that that child is given a meal that they can take home with them, or that they can eat there, so they can have access to nutritious foods.

Private vehicles - in Montgomery County, Georgia, the Montgomery County public schools not only collaborates with their ride-on and metro public bus system to get city passes for their children, but the public school also collaborates with their county departments of Health and Human Services transportation to provide a private vehicle called the Lunch Circulator. And it's posted and picks up children at different locations between 10:30 am and 1:00 pm every 30 minutes. So counties, cities, towns, understanding the importance of getting meals to children or children to the meals, and the impact of hunger in their community, the impact it has on the health of their community, the health of their children, but more importantly, if children are not accessing nutritious food

during the summer, what happens when they're back in school in September? All of the learning, the health issues that begin to exhibit as they come back because it is very difficult, you and I know, to be hungry day in and day out. It's very stressful, you and I know, to not know where your next meal is going to come from. And many of the children in this country are faced with that reality each and every day.

We have looked at and we continue to look at partnerships, and I hope we're going to be able to learn from you today, ideas that we can then take back through our seven regions and say here are some partners. We will be supplying the names of everybody who's here to our regional offices and say, "Reach out, because here are some partners that you may be able to bring to the table with other partners to determine the best way that we can address this hunger issue among our children." But at the same time if you're trying to have a healthy parent, if you're trying to have a healthy adult in the home, you have to have a healthy child that that parent is parenting, because the stress of the parent to know that he or she cannot provide for their children also impacts their health issues. So hunger is a health issue and we are looking forward to continue working with all of you in the room and the department of transportation to try and address this issue. Thank you.