



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### Lauren Waits Testifies Before Congress on Benefits of WIC and SNAP Panelists Provide Insights and Suggestions into Better Child Nutrition

ATLANTA, GA – April 16, 2019 – [Lauren Waits](#), Director of Government Affairs for the [Atlanta Community Food Bank](#) (ACFB), testified on Capitol Hill on April 10th before members of the U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry Committee on “Perspectives on Child Nutrition and Reauthorization.” Waits, who has more than 20 years’ experience in maternal and child health issues, and who is a graduate of the Harvard School of Public Health, provided testimony to the committee on the value of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIC (Women’s, Infants, and Children Food and Nutritional Service), and her efforts to increase enrollment.

Waits was joined by six other panelists who shared their insights and perspectives on addressing deficiencies regarding general food and after-school food service programs. They provided suggestions on how to better meet overall nutritional needs and made recommendations on streamlining various programs.

“The Atlanta Community Food Bank, with the assistance of 600 partner agencies, serves more than 61 million meals a year to over 755,000 people in a 29-county service area spanning metropolitan Atlanta and northwest Georgia,” said Waits, who represents the Georgia WIC Working Group, a partnership between government, philanthropic, business, and non-profit stakeholders working together to increase WIC enrollment and participation.

Waits requested that Congress make sure WIC is more easily accessible to needing families, support extended enlisting periods, help maintain a family’s connection for longer periods, reduce unnecessary certification barriers, and promote positive enrollment between WIC and other programs that benefit children such as SNAP and Medicaid.

“WIC is a powerful factor in helping women have safer pregnancies, fewer premature births, less infant deaths, and positive outcomes for infants and children, as there is less obesity, improved school performance, and improved mental health,” said Waits. “Groups like ours can help to support outreach and enrollment in WIC, but we need Congress to make sure that broad availability continues. We support extended enlisting periods, reducing unnecessary certification



barriers, and raising the age of WIC eligible coverage to age 6 so children not yet enrolled in school continue to have access to nutritional food.”

Georgia was among the first states to offer universal Pre-K service, and under former Gov. Sonny Perdue, created the first state-level Department of Early Care and Learning. “Our state has made significant investments in early childhood programs and we have a thriving, quality rated healthcare system, yet one in five children do not always have enough to eat,” said Waits. “Our Food Bank supports a range of community partnerships with pre-school, school, and summer meal providers so children can take full advantage of healthy meals available through federal nutrition programs, yet WIC participation is declining in Georgia and across the country.”

Despite Georgia’s agricultural resources, about one in seven families are food insecure, which means they do not always know where their next meal is coming from. “The WIC program has emerged as a focus for our Food Bank, because it safeguards the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk,” said Waits.

With the support of the WIC Working Group and funding from donors, the Atlanta Community Food Bank hired an independent market research firm in 2017 to conduct a series of focus group studies to determine why eligible families were not enrolled. “We found that even non-participating families had positive perceptions of the program but most were not familiar with the fact that it helps pay for infant formula and milk,” Waits said. “Not everyone was aware of the additional food benefits, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, nor did families realize that WIC provides nutrition education.” Based on the study’s findings, families confirmed “food insecurity” was a real threat in their lives. “Most families had a story about worrying if they could pay for their food, and WIC played a crucial part in preventing them from facing a food crisis,” testified Waits.

Reasons for non-enrollment varied from time consumption, taking time off work, voucher delays in check-out lines, difficulty identifying WIC eligible foods, and other issues that make parents wonder if it’s worth the effort. “Those same families, however, are very comfortable using technology to enroll in all sorts of activities via their smartphones and online,” noted Waits. “They would be excited about digital WIC apps that would help get them certified, receive nutritional foods, and fulfill other program requirements.” She testified that some states have these technologies but as yet, Georgia does not.

“We ask that new legislation include measures to promote positive enrollment between WIC and other programs that benefit children, like SNAP and Medicaid,” said Waits. The Georgia WIC Working Group has pushed for a comparison of Medicaid and WIC participation and new technology systems that allow us to evaluate successes more quickly and easily than ever before.

**[About Atlanta Food Community Bank](#)**



The Atlanta Community Food Bank works to end hunger with the food, people and big ideas needed to ensure our neighbors have the nourishment to lead healthy and productive lives. Far too many people in our own community experience hunger every day, including children, seniors and working families.

Through more than 600 nonprofit partners, we help more than 755,000 people get healthy food every year. Our goal is that, by 2025, all hungry people across metro Atlanta and North Georgia will have access to the nutritious meals they need when they need them. It takes the power of our whole community to make that possible. Join us at [ACFB.org](https://www.acfb.org).

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