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Written Testimony of
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Before
The Committee on Education and Labor
United States House of Representatives

Hearing: "Challenges and Opportunities for Improving School Nutrition"

March 4, 2008

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McKeon and members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to provide testimony regarding concerns with federal nutrition policy in light of the Westland Meat Company recall. I am Penny Parham, the Administrative Director for the Department of Food and Nutrition for Miami-Dade County Public Schools in Florida, which is the nation's fourth largest school district. I am a Registered Dietitian with a Master's degree in Dietetics and Nutrition.

Miami –Dade County Public Schools serves over 40 million meals annually. Although we have over 350,000 students in 325 school buildings spread across over 2,000 square miles, facilitating a recall is a challenge for which we are well prepared. The first notification we received regarding Westland Meat Company was to hold the beef aside. This notification came via e-mail, from the Florida Branch of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Once we were provided the lot numbers of the beef in question, we had all our food service managers label and hold those boxes in a separate area pending further instructions. We communicated with our contracted distributor to identify and hold all products at the warehouse, and communicated with our school district leadership to inform all stakeholders of the status of the beef hold. We then removed **ALL** beef products from the menu until further notice in order to preserve the highest level of confidence in our school meal programs with our students, parents and the Miami-Dade community at large.

During the hold and throughout the recall notification, there was continued communication between Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the USDA via e-mail, press releases and a conference call. We received numerous communications from contracted manufacturers who had processed beef from the Westland plant, and we received support information in the form of guidance materials and contact information from the USDA for answering questions from the community about the hold, recalls and food safety measures.

When we were officially informed by the USDA of the recall, we worked with our local media and our local health department to respond. We documented and destroyed the beef following national recommendations and internal policy to dispose of the product (denature). We then documented our disposal for the USDA and requested reimbursement or replacement of the beef that was destroyed. It is our understanding that we will receive reimbursement or replacement of the beef in a timely manner.

As a result of the recall and removal of all beef from the menu, our food service program incurred additional costs because we had to increase our inventory in order to replace those items on the menu that were made with beef. A recall such as the Westland case contributes to the public's perception that school food is inferior and of lower quality. Moving forward we need to assure the public that the same level of care is taken with the behind the scenes treatment of food as is taken with the preparation and serving of food. The public needs assurance that animals are not being mistreated and that sick or "downed" animals are not used in the production of beef products. In addition to the public's perception, it is important that front line child nutrition employees, such as the cafeteria managers, cooks and servers are assured that the commodity foods they receive in their kitchens are safe, wholesome and of the highest quality possible.

While the USDA was prompt and communicated effectively in their handling of the recall of Westland beef, it is of the utmost importance that they are also prompt in providing the documented and requested reimbursement or replacement of the beef that was destroyed. The USDA should assist school food service programs that have been hit hard by rising food and labor costs. The cost of staple foods including, milk, grains, produce and meat have risen over 23 percent. Notably, our cost for milk in the 2007-2008 school year alone has risen an additional \$4.5 million. Reimbursements from the USDA do not cover the rising costs of food and labor. Miami-Dade County Public Schools' policy is to provide health promoting foods to students such as fresh produce, whole grains, trans-fat free foods and lean meats. The rising costs and shortfalls in reimbursements make this extremely difficult to do. We do not want to serve our students highly refined sugar and flour products which are more affordable, but we are continually being pushed down this path.

The recall of the Westland beef highlights the sometimes complicated and complex mission of providing high quality, health enhancing foods to our students in school meal programs. To achieve our shared goal of promoting healthy lifestyles, school nutrition programs must be able to procure and serve wholesome, nutrient-dense, high quality foods for school breakfast, lunch and after school care snack programs. The USDA could have a more meaningful and substantial impact on this shared responsibility by increasing the federal reimbursement rates to more accurately reflect the cost of producing a school meal, and by making fluid milk a USDA commodity allocation in school meal programs.

On behalf of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, I would like to thank you for your care and concern for our nations' most valuable resource – our children. Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the committee and I welcome any questions you may have.