



**DeLauro Keynote Speech on Cooking, Nutrition, Obesity Issues
Delivered at CHNCT Foundation's Why Cooking Matters? Conference**

June 9, 2012 – Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro (CT-3) delivered the keynote speech today at Cooking Matters Connecticut's Conference, Why Cooking Matters. DeLauro addressed why cooking, nutrition and food insecurity are critical issues for our nation and what Congress can do to address them. The following remarks are as prepared for delivery:

First, let me thank Jamesina, Executive Director Tressa Spears Jackson, and all the members of the Community Health Network of Connecticut for extending the invitation to join you today. Thank you also to all the health and nutrition advocates and volunteers who are joining us today. And welcome to all the participants of the Cooking Matters program who are here from all across the state.

I also want to say a word of thanks to my good friend, Chef Tim Cipriano of the New Haven Public Schools, who could not be here today and who kindly suggested me instead. Chef Tim, you are the best. Share Our Strength's Cooking Matters is such a great series of programs. They help families, children, and teenagers across America learn how to make affordable and healthy choices, and how to prepare low-cost meals that are both nutritious and delicious.

Since it began in 1993, Cooking Matters has grown to reach over 17,000 families a year. And nine out of ten graduates of the program report they make healthier choices – and are better cooks! – than they were before they enrolled.

So this is a program after my own heart, not just because of the important lessons it teaches about health and nutrition. Cooking is one of my great passions. It is therapy to me, and an integral part of who I am and where I come from. I am Italian, and we take cooking very seriously! My grandfather and grandmother were pastry chefs – for many years, they ran Canestri's Pastry Shop in New Haven's Wooster Square. I myself learned to cook from my mom and I love it.

Particularly in this economy, knowing how to stretch a dollar in the supermarket, and how to get the best, most nutritious foods for the lowest cost, are important life skills. And it is so important to get this right, for our kids and our grandkids. Children in America are facing a double-edged sword. In recent years, both malnutrition and obesity rates in our country have been skyrocketing.

On one hand, middle-class and working families are working harder than ever to make ends meet, and child poverty, child hunger, and food insecurity have all been on the rise.

In 2010, nearly 15 percent of American households were food insecure. This means nearly 50 million Americans, including over 16 million children, faced the real risk of going to bed hungry.

Similarly, over 46 million Americans – almost half of them children – used food stamps last year to get their basic foods. Nearly 75 percent of Food Stamp participants are families with children.

Here in our district, nearly one in seven households was not sure if they could afford enough food to feed their families.

On the other hand, we face a growing epidemic of child obesity that is harming both the health and the quality of life of our kids. Even as adult obesity has doubled in recent years, we have seen child obesity triple.

A Mission Readiness report recently found that as many as 75% of Americans age 17-24 are currently unfit for the armed services. More than a quarter of those young Americans – 27% -- are unfit because they are overweight or obese. The same report estimated that obesity costs our country over \$75 billion a year.

According to some estimates, obesity cost our country nearly \$150 billion in health care and related costs in 2008 – roughly 9% of total health care spending. If we do not take action, the American Public Health Association estimates these costs could reach more than 20% of health care spending by 2018. Even worse, if current trends continue, kids today may be the first generation in America to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Just think about that for a moment – a shorter life expectancy than their parents. And that does not begin to discuss quality of life, as the prevalence of chronic diseases including diabetes and cardiovascular disease increase. Inaction is irresponsible.

Both of these problems – malnutrition and obesity – need to be addressed. And in fact, they are two sides of the same coin. Families struggling economically have a harder time affording healthy food options. And, as the movie you will be watching in a moment – *The Apple Pushers* – makes clear, often it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find healthy foods, or even supermarkets, in high-poverty neighborhoods.

That is why *Cooking Matters* is such a great program – it works to address both of these issues by making the best nutrition information available to families so they can make healthy choices, like 100% juice or water instead of soda. This is something I think is hugely important. We have to make it as quick and easy as possible for men and women to make healthy decisions about nutrition.

As you know, we passed a comprehensive health care reform bill in Congress two years ago. And one of the elements in that bill I am most proud of is something I worked very hard to include – menu labeling. From now on, any fast food chain or restaurant with twenty or more locations is required to disclose the basic calorie content of their food choices, right on the menu. In addition, vending machines now have to display the nutritional information of the foods on hand.

It is no coincidence that, as obesity rates have skyrocketed, Americans have eaten more and more meals outside the home – Families now eat out twice as much as they did in 1970, and an estimated one-third of calories are now consumed, and almost half of total food dollars are now spent, at restaurants and eating establishments.

That is a lot of one's diet to spend "flying blind" in terms of calories. All the more reason why we should be cooking at home!

In fact, research has shown that not only are many Americans unaware of the recommended calorie intake suggested for healthy living. Consumers – and even expert dieticians – have a hard time assessing the calorie level of a fast-food meal by sight alone. A study conducted by NYU and the Center for Science in the Public Interest several years ago found that even nutrition professionals consistently underestimated a meal's calorie count by 200 to 600 calories.

Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, consumers will soon have the information they need upfront to make wise and healthy nutrition decisions. In fact, where tried, menu labeling has already paid dividends. A

study by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, where menu-labeling went into effect in 2008, found clear evidence that people who saw the calorie information bought food with fewer calories.

And better information works both ways. In California, where menu labeling has already gone into effect, we have already seen restaurants offering more healthy choices and making other items on their menu more health-conscious, in preparation for the calorie information being more available for public consumption.

When restaurants begin working to compete over the best low-calorie options, everyone benefits. But another part of making sure families are getting the nutrition information they need is making sure that information is accurate.

A few years ago, the food industry created its own labeling system, called the Smart Choices program. To qualify for a 'Smart Choices' label, a food product had to meet a set of criteria, based on FDA dietary guidelines, that suggested it was a healthy option for families.

But there was a catch. The dietary guidelines did not set a standard for sugar. And so we saw extraordinarily sugary cereal, such as Froot Loops and Cookie Crisp, being promoted as an FDA-approved healthy option. As a Republican colleague of mine put it, just because you eat one doughnut instead of two, that does not make it a smart choice!

So I think it is important that we work hard to ensure that the foods that are being labeled as healthy in the supermarket are in fact healthy.

Another place where we can help to reduce malnutrition and obesity is through school meals. This is something Chef Tim of the New Haven Public Schools has really gone above and beyond on – putting salad bars in our schools, and working to create delicious and healthy menu options.

As it happens, kids consume roughly 35-50% of their daily calories during the school day. And countless studies have shown that children with access to a nutritious breakfast learn more and perform better in school. At the end of the last Congress, I worked hard to pass the Hunger-Free Kids Act, which expanded access to meal programs for at-risk children and improved the nutritional quality of food in schools.

It did this by authorizing the USDA to set standards that got the junk food infiltrating our classrooms and cafeterias out the door.

Along with enhancing access to information and improving the quality of foods where it can, I also believe that government has a moral obligation to ensure all Americans have enough to eat. That is why I have made it a special priority in my time in Congress to fight for our nation's nutrition assistance and anti-hunger programs – vital programs like Food Stamps, Meals on Wheels, and the Women with Infant Children Feeding Program.

These programs make a tremendous difference for the health and well being of millions of families. According to the Census Bureau, the Food Stamp program lifted 5.2 million Americans over the poverty line in 2010. And without food stamps, the poverty rate would have been over 21% for children. 21%! In the past, key anti-hunger programs like Food Stamps have enjoyed a long tradition of bipartisan support. As Harry Truman well put it, "Nothing is more important in our national life than the welfare of our children, and proper nourishment comes first in attaining this welfare." That is why, in 1969, Richard Nixon called for a significant expansion of the Food Stamp program because, and I quote, "the moment is at hand to put an end to hunger in America."

This is something everyone in Washington used to agree on. In the past, there has been a tradition of bipartisanship on hunger and nutrition.

If you look at the names of those who served on the McGovern Select Committee on hunger and nutrition in the 1960's and '70's, you will see Democrats like George McGovern, Walter Mondale, Edward Kennedy, Ed Zorinsky, Claiborne Pell, Hubert Humphrey, and Patrick Leahy. And you will see Republicans like Jacob Javits, Charles Percy, Peter Dominick, Richard Schweiker, Henry Bellmon, Mark Hatfield, and Bob Dole.

Hunger and nutrition programs have long enjoyed both liberal and conservative support, from the big cities and the coasts to the rural states and the heartland. Because they are the right thing to do, and they are needed.

However, the budget proposed by House Majority decimates Food Stamps and the rest of our federal anti-hunger programs.

Over ten years, the budget would cut Food Stamps by over 17 percent, or \$133.5 billion. Under this budget, over eight million men, women, and children may be cut from the program.

And it is not just Food Stamps. Every anti-hunger program could see cuts of as much as 19%. That means 2.5 million pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children could be slashed from the Women with Infant Children feeding program. It would mean deep cuts to the Emergency Food Aid Program, Meals on Wheels, and other federal anti-hunger efforts.

I disagree with this approach. I believe we should fund nutrition assistance to the fullest of our ability, and make sure that this generation of American children has access to the affordable, healthy and nutritious foods they need to thrive. I will be working hard for the remainder of this year, and beyond, to see that we continue our investments in better nutrition and fighting hunger.

In the meantime, I am glad to see programs like Cooking Matters working on the ground to fight malnutrition and obesity, to improve the health and nutrition of American families, and to help instill a love and appreciation of cooking. Thank you for working to make a difference. And thank you for allowing me to speak to you today. I hope I can answer your questions. Thank you so much.