



WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES

700 Prospect Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44115-1110
Phone: 216.736.3700
Fax: 216.736.3703

Barbara Baylor M.P.H
Minister for Healthcare Justice

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All I want for Christmas is to eat Pizza and French Fries?

Barbara Baylor M.P.H

Is pizza with tomato sauce a vegetable? Apparently yes, according to Congress.

Last month Congress passed a spending bill that unraveled school health lunch standards proposed by the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that aimed to revamp nutritional standards for student's subsidized meals. The USDA Proposals suggested cutting back on salt; reducing starchy vegetables like potatoes, corn, lima beans and peas; and adding more fresh fruits and vegetables. The USDA also proposed not counting tomato paste on pizza as a vegetable.

Food companies that produce frozen pizza, the salt industry and potato growers lobbied heavily against the changes and some conservative members of Congress have called the push for healthier foods another example of "Nanny State" overreach indicating that the government should not be telling children what to eat! The term "Nanny State" refers to policies where the government or state is perceived as being excessive in its desire to protect, govern or control particular aspects of society. Personally, I do not believe that's what was being proposed here. As a public health professional, I understand how it could be perceived that efforts to reduce childhood obesity might be seen as controlling,

since Public Health is charged with improving the health of communities through education, promotion of healthy lifestyles, research for disease and injury prevention. Today one in three children and adolescents are diagnosed as obese or overweight and we are left to ponder this sobering reality. As adults we often do not make good decisions about our health without the benefit of education, awareness, resources, good support systems. Oftentimes we don't change our habits or lifestyle unless we see a real perceived threat on our life and even then we might not make a change. To say that our children alone can make good decisions about what foods to eat is a crock. Yes, they would rather eat Pizza and French Fries. We agree that parents should model good health routines and good eating habits at an early age and we must not put all the blame on parents when this doesn't happen. We cannot negate the fact that parents need important protections and support and partnerships. Think about this. We have eliminated structured physical education in schools. We have allowed vending machines in the high schools. Food deserts (neighborhoods that are more than a mile from a supermarket) prevent access to healthy foods. Food companies dictate what foods can and cannot be served in our schools. We all have a responsibility to see to it that our children grow into healthy productive children. As obesity rates increase, life expectancy decreases and health care costs keep rising. It will take intentional, coordinated and integrated efforts – faith organizations, communities, schools, families and yes - the government to continue raising awareness about this critical health issue and to work on developing effective policies, programs and nutritional standards. As we celebrate the holiday, no doubt we may all eat some Pizza and French Fries. If we do, let us also remember to include healthier food choices for our children as a gift of life and love.

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