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January 21, 2014

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20010

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

On behalf of Children's HealthWatch, a pediatric research center, we write to express serious concern about potato industry lobbying efforts advocating that white potatoes be included in WIC food packages (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children). As you know, WIC food packages are informed by nutritional science and experts in maternal and child health. What American children need is more exposure to green, orange, and yellow vegetables that are high in vitamins and minerals, such as iron – not white potatoes, which are already heavily consumed by infants in the United States.

WIC has been responsive to changes in the food supply, diet, and health needs of American women, infants, and children. In 2009, the WIC food packages were updated according to recommendations from an Institute of Medicine panel of nutritional science and health experts. Fruits and vegetables have a prominent place in these revised WIC food packages. Many of the vitamins and minerals that infants and young children need to grow and develop, but are not receiving, come from low-calorie, nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables. Allowing families to use vouchers to buy white potatoes would mean less money for the fruits and vegetables their infants and young children need but frequently lack, such as dark-green leafy vegetables. We urge you not to add white potatoes to the WIC food package under the report language in the Omnibus appropriations law because adding white potatoes would not “contribute towards meeting the special nutritional needs of program participants.”

Since WIC's creation in 1972, policymakers of both parties have agreed that decisions on the foods to include in the WIC food packages should be left to independent experts, based on the best scientific evidence available. A successful lobbying campaign by the potato industry would be a devastating blow to the longstanding precedent that has served WIC and its participants so well and helped it to become one of our nation's most effective programs, resulting in fewer premature births, fewer infant deaths, preventing low birth weight, developmental delays and a host of other negative child health outcomes.

Allowing special interest lobbying from the potato industry would encourage lobbyists for other foods to launch similar efforts, regardless of what the science shows or what women, infants, and children actually need. Watering down WIC's nutritional benefits could compromise one of the most proven-effective programs for women, infants, and children in the country. As Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we thank you for your leadership in providing a safe, sufficient and nutritious food supply for the American people, and we urge you to maintain the strength and integrity of our nation's food assistance programs.

Thank you for your time and attention to our letter.

Sincerely,



Deborah A. Frank, MD
Principal Investigator and Founder
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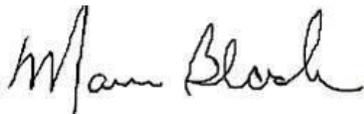
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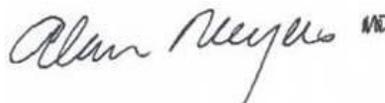
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[Children's HealthWatch](#) is a pediatric research group that monitors changes in economic conditions and public policies and their impact on the well-being of young children. We interview families in urban medical centers serving low-income populations in Baltimore, Boston, Little Rock, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia and have been providing original research and analysis from the frontlines of pediatric care to policy makers and the public for more than a decade.

For questions or further information, please contact Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, Children's HealthWatch Research and Policy Director, at sedc@bu.edu or 617-638-5850.