

**Testimony of Helen Jaffe**  
**Presented to the Education Committee,**  
**Connecticut General Assembly**  
**March 9, 2009**

My name is Helen Jaffe, and I am pleased to participate in this important hearing. I would like to thank the chairmen and members of the Committee. I am here as the chairperson of the Connecticut Committee of the Food Allergy Initiative, a national organization. Our committee includes more than 200 families, mostly in southwestern Connecticut. For 12 years, it has been my privilege to lead this group, which raises food allergy awareness and provides support for families throughout our local community. Most importantly, I am here as the mother of four children with life-threatening food allergies. All of my children are allergic to peanuts and tree nuts and two of them are also allergic to other foods. We live in New Canaan, and my children have attended several public and private schools in the area.

Our earliest experience—with the Weston public schools—was excellent. I was one of several parents who partnered with the school administration to develop an effective food allergy management policy. Other schools proved to be equally sensitive and cooperative for us. But I want to give you an example of what can happen when a school does not take these policies seriously enough.

Despite the severity of their allergies, we want our children to be independent, and we encourage them to be responsible for managing their condition. My oldest daughter, Alexandra, was never fearful or anxious about food until her freshman year, when she entered a new high school. The Director of Food Services assured us that the cafeteria would not serve any dishes with nuts. During her second week in school, she ordered a pasta dish after the server repeatedly assured her that it was nut-free. Within moments, she developed hives and her throat began to close. Fortunately, the school nurse gave her an epi-pen injection, which promptly halted the reaction. Later, we learned that the dish had been left over from an off-hours event, and that the food service director decided to serve it in the cafeteria instead of wasting it. Even though he had undergone food allergy training, he decided that the sauce contained only a small amount of walnuts, so it could do no real harm. In reality, our daughter could have died.

Even when good policies are in place, mistakes can happen. It's important to learn from them and to modify and improve the school's policy accordingly. Unfortunately, this mistake had repercussions. For the rest of the year, my daughter didn't eat properly while in school, because she was never confident that the food was safe.

Fortunately, our family has been diligent and other than the incident just described, has found ways to keep our children safe in school. What happens to families who are not able to advocate and educate as we have? The emotional toll on children whose life is filled with fear and uncertainty is tremendous. Yet, as the law now stands, these families have no recourse but to accept ineffective or even non-existent guidelines. I also know of after-school and summer programs whose administrators simply refuse to allow teachers to learn how to use epi-pens. In some cases, sympathetic teachers have assured parents that if an emergency occurs, they will administer this life-saving medication in spite of the school's intransigence.

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The passage of this landmark legislation was a promise of safety to food-allergic children throughout Connecticut. By adopting the proposed amendments, you will fulfill that promise. Thank you.