

Changing Patterns

As part of reducing the federal budget deficit, some in Congress want to put new limits on the Food Stamp Program. To inform that debate, Hunger Action assembled the following information about the Food Stamp Program in Pennsylvania.

In December 2004, for the first time since May 1997, Food Stamp enrollment exceeded one million individuals. From 1997 and into 2001 Food Stamp enrollment steadily fell until it reached a low of 733,292 during May 2001. Then, as the economy slipped into recession, enrollment began to climb back up to one million.

While overall enrollment at the end of 2004 is very similar to enrollment in May 1997, the composition of the caseload has shifted significantly.

- Currently households that do not receive any form of cash assistance (TANF, General Assistance or SSI) constitute the majority (56 percent) of the Food Stamp caseload. This contrasts to May 1997 when such households were only 41 percent of the total. This change reflects in part the steady and steep decline in the number of households receiving cash assistance (especially TANF), many of whom are now working but can not make ends meet without Food Stamps.
- Despite the economic recovery that began in late 2001, Food Stamp enrollment has continued to climb, particularly among the elderly and among households that had wages from employment. In May 1997 Pennsylvania had 70,671 Food Stamp households in which there was no cash assistance and someone had a job. By December 2004 that number had jumped to 99,729, a 41 percent increase.
- In May 1997 Food Stamp recipients in the 10 counties in the southeast and southwest corners of Pennsylvania constituted 58.5 percent of the caseload. Now, they constitute only 52.8 percent. Both Allegheny and Philadelphia counties have fewer Food Stamp recipients now than then. Meanwhile, enrollment in many more rural counties in the "T" is up sharply – Lancaster by 87 percent, Lebanon by 49 percent and York by 48 percent.

These data suggest that traditional linkages between cash assistance and Food Stamps, and between urbanized areas and Food Stamps, are loosening. New enrollment patterns that reflect the prevalence of low-wage employment are emerging. And Pennsylvania is probably only a few years away from a 50-50 enrollment split between the "T" and non-"T" counties.

Nutrition plays a central role to ensure that children are prepared for and succeeding in school and that adults are healthy and productive. If Congress cuts back on basic nutritional supports, we can expect the repercussions of these cuts to negatively impact on both educational and health systems – potentially with much greater costs to both families and states. Thus, Hunger Action has asked the members of Pennsylvania's congressional delegation to:

- **Oppose efforts to block grant the Food Stamp Program.** A block grant would eliminate the counter-cyclical feature of the Food Stamp Program. During times of recession, when need is greater, there would be no additional public spending available via the Food Stamp Program. This would lead to Food Stamp Program waiting lists, to greater suffering in affected households for children and families, and to deeper and longer economic recessions.
- **Resist spending caps on food and nutrition programs.** A spending cap would force cuts in benefits and restrictions in eligibility. This is the approach Congress adopted in 1996 as part of a budget-balancing effort. Subsequently, however, it realized that the cuts only served to undermine

the goals of Welfare Reform, made the Program more administratively complex and increased the need at food pantries. Thus, Congress eventually reversed nearly all of the 1996 cuts. Reflecting these hard-won lessons, in 2002 the Bush Administration launched a new marketing and outreach campaign under the slogan "Food Stamps Make America Stronger."

The Food Stamp Program has become a vital part of the household budget for many Pennsylvania households struggling to achieve self-sufficiency. The Program must remain strong. To cut it now would only lead to greater costs in the future.