

The Food Stamp Program and the 2007 Farm Bill

Over the next fifteen months, the Senate and House agriculture committees will prepare legislation to reauthorize the federal programs included in the Farm Bill, which expires in September 2007. The Food Stamp Program (FSP), the foundation of America's effort to end hunger and a program that serves 27.5 million Americans a month, will be included. As the most expensive item in the Farm Bill, food stamps - with an annual budget of around \$35 billion - will get lots of attention.

Beyond matters of cost, Congress is expected to be concerned about the impact of diet on health. Can the FSP be used to persuade low-income Americans to eat more healthily? In one sense it already serves that purpose through Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE), which funds Pennsylvania's Nutrition Education Program (PA NEP). Beyond that, however, some are suggesting that the FSP more directly impact diet by targeting the foods that contribute most to better health. We know, for example, that we would be less susceptible to chronic disease by eating more fruits and vegetables. So why not use the FSP to encourage the purchase of such items?

Writing in the January issue of the *American Dietetic Association*, Dr. Marilyn Townsend, a cooperative extension nutrition specialist at the University of California, suggests such a plan. Instead of a program designed to prop up agriculture prices and add calories to the diet of low-income households, the program should be redesigned as "a health and nutrition intervention." To accomplish this, Townsend would restrict the use of food stamp dollars to high-nutrient, low-energy dense foods. Low-income consumers could continue to purchase energy-dense foods with their own funds but not with their EBT card. "A recipient could use food stamps to buy an orange, but not orange punch; 1% milk, but not cream or ice cream; whole wheat bread, but not doughnuts." As a result, producers of fruits and vegetables would experience an increase in demand. Grocery stores in low-income communities would change the nutritional quality of their merchandise to meet the FSP criteria. To get its share of the pie, the industry would be encouraged to produce tastier, healthier foods that could be purchased with food stamp dollars.

On the other side of the issue is the food industry, which opposes the use of public funds to encourage the purchase of some foods over others. Low-income consumers also have concerns with the fact that Townsend's proposal would shorten the list of grocery items that could be purchased with the EBT card. Then there is the matter of cost. Currently the monthly FSP allotment is based on the Thrifty Food Plan, which assumes a diet with few whole grains or fresh fruits and vegetables. A recent study of 25 Los Angeles and Sacramento grocery stores by Dr. Karen M. Jetter and Dr. Diana L. Cassady and published in the January issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* concluded that for a two-week shopping list, the cost of a market basket based upon the current U.S. dietary guidelines (whole grains, low-fat dairy, lean meat, fruits and vegetables) costs 18 percent more than the standard Thrifty Food Plan market basket.

Advocates for low-income consumers are working to formulate variations of the Townsend proposal that would preserve a greater element of consumer choice. The Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center has asked the USDA to offer food stamp recipients a choice of two food plans: the existing Thrifty Food Plan, which would operate much as it does now and a Healthy Food Plan, which would provide 15-20 percent more buying power but would restrict purchases to nutrient-dense foods. California Food Policy Advocates have proposed an incentive plan where FSP participants would receive a 50 percent credit whenever buying fresh fruits and vegetables. If a consumer purchased \$20 in fresh produce, a \$10 credit would be put back on the account.

Variations on these ideas have already caught the attention of public officials. According to a January 29 article in the *New York Times*, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee wants to "give food stamps more purchasing power when they are used to buy fruits or vegetables."

Readers who are interested in participating in this debate are encouraged to become active soon. Senator Rick Santorum and Congressman Tim Holden, as members of the Senate and House agriculture committees, are currently the most important points of contact.

Hunger Action is leading a process among anti-hunger activists to prepare a position statement that would be presented to Senator Santorum and Representative Holden later this year. This statement will identify PA's nutrition priorities in the next Farm Bill. Readers with suggestions should email Berry Friesen at info@pahunger.org.