

## Gearing Up for Next Farm Bill

This year, as a part of National Hunger Awareness Day (June 6<sup>th</sup>), the PA Association of Regional Food Banks (PARF) provided an opportunity for Pennsylvanian organizations concerned with food and nutrition to offer testimony regarding the 2007 Federal Farm Bill. The panel receiving the testimony consisted of staff from the offices of U.S. Senator Arlen Specter, U.S. Senator Rick Santorum, Congressman Tim Holden, Congressman Todd Platts, Senator Vincent Hughes, Representative Arthur Hershey, Representative Peter Daley, Representative George Kenney, and Representative Frank Oliver.

Hunger Action's executive director, Berry Friesen, presented seven recommendations on behalf of his and six other anti-hunger organizations: 1) Make the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) available in every state; 2) Raise the Food Stamp Program's minimum benefit to \$25 per month; 3) Increase general asset limits in the Food Stamp Program; 4) Encourage more fruit and vegetable purchases with Food Stamp dollars; 5) Encourage states to integrate nutrition education with food distribution; 6) Fund local food system capacity-building in support of food security; and 7) Improve access to fresh produce by more funding for local marketing. This document and supporting materials can be found on our website at [www.pahunger.org/html/news/news\\_FarmBill2007.html.htm](http://www.pahunger.org/html/news/news_FarmBill2007.html.htm).

Sheila Christopher, PARF's executive director, focused her comments on the commodity programs (TEFAP and the CSFP). She encouraged more flexibility in administrative arrangements. She also emphasized the need for an expansion of the CSFP to include not only more states but also more counties within the states that already have the program.

Randy St. John of the PA Food Merchants Association spoke on behalf of supermarkets, grocery stores, and convenience stores. Currently only about 56 percent of eligible households participate in the Food Stamp Program; St. John urged Congress to make the program more accessible to the people who need it. He also suggested that the Farmers Market Nutrition Program be expanded to include any seller of local produce, not just farmers' markets.

Diana Fox, speaking on behalf of the American Cancer Society and PA Action for Healthy Kids, addressed the health risks associated with poverty. She highlighted the problem of obesity, which is more likely to occur among low-income populations because of the need to purchase inexpensive food. "Food security should not just be about the quantity of food but also the quality of those calories," said Fox. She recommended more nutrition education and improved low-income access to fruits and vegetables.

The executive director of the PA Fruits and Vegetable Growers' Association, William Troxell, testified on behalf of his members. As the state with the third highest rate of direct sales from growers to consumers, PA would benefit greatly from expanding the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. He also requested funding for placing EBT machines at farm stands.

Rev. Sandra Strauss, the executive director of the PA Council of Churches, also testified. She emphasized the moral imperative of providing access to healthful food for everyone.

Joyce Rothermel, chief executive officer of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank and a member of the board of directors of America's Second Harvest, made several specific recommendations. For the Food Stamp Program, she called for an increase in participation, a realistic food plan, an increase in the minimum allotment, and a strong opposition to block grants. She also called on Congress to make the CSFP an entitlement serving everyone who is eligible.

Gary Swann, director of Governmental Affairs for the PA Farm Bureau, expressed the strong support among Pennsylvania farmers for food and nutrition programs. "The desire to feed America is part of the farmer's motivation." Swann said his association recognized the importance of the FSP and FMNP, as well as the need for pilot programs that can address regional priorities.

The panelists from the offices of Specter, Santorum, Holden, and Platts expressed appreciation for the hearing and promised to convey the recommendations to their legislators. Debate about the next Farm Bill is already underway and will be near the top of the agenda when the new Congress convenes in February, 2007. Pennsylvania is fortunate to have two representatives on agriculture committees - Santorum in the Senate and Holden in the House.