

## **PA to Lose Millions in Nutrition Education Funds**

Effective October 1<sup>st</sup>, Pennsylvania will lose millions in federal funds that currently are being used to improve the dietary practices of households that are eligible for the Food Stamp Program.

The federal funds are used by food banks and other anti-hunger agencies to create educational programs related to food selection and preparation. Known as the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNEP), the initiative is designed to help the poor reduce obesity and diet-related diseases by making wise choices in their food purchases. During the current federal fiscal year, Pennsylvania will receive approximately \$14 million in federal funds under this arrangement.

To qualify for the funds, state and local agencies must provide other non-federal funds on a dollar-for-dollar basis. One approved source for this match is the money anti-hunger agencies receive from the State of Pennsylvania to purchase food for the poor through the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP). Under a reinterpretation of policy by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), funds provided by the SFPP will no longer qualify as match. As a result, \$7 million in federal funds will no longer be available.

The decision reverses a federal policy that has been in place for six years. FNS has reviewed Pennsylvania's program annually and has encouraged it to grow through the use of funds that Pennsylvania makes available through the State Food Purchase Program.

Many common and costly health-related problems such as hypertension, diabetes and coronary artery disease are diet related. Obesity is increasingly prevalent in all socio-economic levels, including households living at or near the poverty line. In recognition of these facts, FNS encourages low-income households to model their dietary practices after the requirements of the Food Guide Pyramid.

"Unfortunately, less expensive food is often less healthy to eat," said Patrick Druhan, director of a nutrition education program at the Montgomery County Community Action Development Commission in Norristown. "Yet by necessity, that's what low-income families rely on. By combining the SFPP commodities with FSNEP information, we've been able to reach these families with a positive message that speaks to their difficult budgeting dilemmas."

Food banks, with their large clientele of low-income households, have been uniquely positioned for this task. They provide food to people in need and can simultaneously provide information about how to use that food to maximum nutritional advantage. Moreover, the presence of nutrition professionals in food banks has encouraged those agencies to be more conscious of the nutritional quality of the food they distribute to the poor.

Pat Temple-West, director of Nutritional Development Services for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, expects the FNS decision will cause major disruption. "Unless this decision is reversed, the capacity of the food banks and anti-hunger agencies will be crippled, the nutrition professionals will be fired, the emphasis on nutrition will fade, and the poor will have less information to guide their food choices. I hope it's not too late for the decision-makers in Washington to reconsider."

Hunger Action has contacted the offices of senators Arlen Specter and Rick Santorum to request their review of the FNS re-interpretation of its policy.