

Hunger Action Asks USDA to Prioritize Nutrition

The existing Farm Bill expires in September 2007. Well before that time, Congress wants new legislation in place so that farmers and ranchers can adjust their plans to fit the new federal policy. To meet that schedule, the agriculture committees in Congress are expected to schedule hearings by next spring. The Bush Administration wants to have the basic shape of its plan finished by then. At an October 14th hearing in Baltimore, Hunger Action made five recommendations.

1. Adopt a "Healthy Food Plan" with Larger Monthly Allotments. Currently monthly allotments are based on the "Thrifty Food Plan", which does not provide enough buying power for households to eat a balanced diet, including fruits and vegetables. In the next Farm Bill, the FSP should include a "Healthy Food Plan" that provides higher monthly allotments for households that elect to use their food stamp dollars to purchase whole grains, lean meats, eggs, beans, nuts, fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy. To preserve consumer choice, the Thrifty Food Plan also would remain available to households.

2. Integrate Nutrition Education with Emergency Food Distribution. Until the USDA changed the rules, Pennsylvania had excellent nutrition education programs in food pantries. We want to bring those programs back. To accomplish that, the next Farm Bill should authorize the USDA to match the value of food purchased with state or private funds when that food is distributed along with TEFAP commodities to needy households in conjunction with direct nutrition education activities in which the head of household is participating.

3. Continue the Existing National Structure. The FSP performed very well recently in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It quickly and flexibly provided food assistance to the hundreds of thousands of displaced households. This outstanding performance would not have occurred if the FSP had been operating as a state-by-state block grant program. The existing national structure should be retained.

4. Raise Asset Limits. For many years now, the asset limit for households without an elderly or disabled member has been \$2,000. By such a low limit, we limit food assistance to those who are nearly indigent. By raising the asset limit, the Program would become more available to working families who need a bit of help during periods of unemployment and to the elderly who are no longer employed and need to live off their savings.

5. Streamline the Eligibility Process. Many needy households are not participating in the FSP because the process is too time consuming and requires too much documentation. In part, this is because the Program is very precise in awarding the most benefits to those who have the greatest need. By simplifying the Program and offering averaged allotments, the process could be streamlined. This would improve access to the Program and many more working families and seniors would participate.