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MORE PA RESIDENTS CAN NOW GET FOOD STAMPS/NUTRITION ASSISTANCE Statewide Nonprofit Offers Help with Application Process

Harrisburg (October 9, 2008). Beginning October 1, modified guidelines to the Food Stamp Program make it possible for more Pennsylvanians in need to get benefits. This comes as good news for those across the Commonwealth who are facing increasing costs for food, gas, and heating fuel for their homes. Census data released last month revealed that more than 1.4 million Pennsylvanians live in poverty. Of this group, at least 17 percent are not currently receiving food stamps.

Along with the typical increases in income guidelines and maximum benefit allotments, there are a host of other changes this year that will include more Pennsylvanians than ever before. "We are very encouraged by these changes to the Food Stamp Program here in Pennsylvania," explains Food Stamp Outreach Manager of the PA Hunger Action Center, Laura Tobin. "It means that more people will be able to buy nutritious foods for their families and for themselves." Hunger Action provides assistance over the phone to those who want to apply for food stamps but are unsure if they are eligible or are unable to get to their local County Assistance Office. The Food Stamp Line is open Monday through Friday 9am to 6pm (other times are available as needed) and can be reached at 1-800-634-2033.

The Pennsylvania Department of Welfare (DPW) has made it possible for many households to receive benefits without exhausting their safety nets through use of a categorical eligibility provision in the administration of the Food Stamp Program. Many households' resources, such as vehicles, savings accounts, and investments, are no longer applied to an asset limit test, which had kept many individuals, especially seniors, from being eligible for food stamp benefits. For seniors, this often translates into money set aside in savings accounts or CDs for burial expenses or property taxes.

At the federal level, the passage of the Farm Bill earlier this year has made much-needed improvements to the program. Families with children enrolled in childcare programs will also see some relief. A family's out-of-pocket childcare costs are now deducted in full from household income – not capped at \$200/month. This may make previously ineligible families now eligible, as well as increase the benefit amount of those families already receiving food stamps. This is estimated to be an average of nearly \$40 more a month for those families.

The minimum benefit has also gone up to \$14 from \$10 a month for one or two person households. While this amount may still seem relatively small, it adds up to almost \$50 more a year in benefits. The minimum benefit is now calculated as a percentage of the Thrifty Food Plan, meaning that when the Plan is adjusted for food prices, the benefit will increase.

Both the standard and shelter deductions have also been raised. These typically equate to an increase in benefits for those already participating in the program. However, for those

households with a member over the age of 60 or disabled, it could mean that they are now eligible for assistance.

There is one more change for the Food Stamp Program this fall – its name. The Farm Bill changed the name of the program to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). According to DPW, the state will also be adopting this new name in time. Hopefully, all of these changes to the program will make getting food stamps a “SNAP” for those most in need.