

PA Hunger Advocate

Promoting Nutrition and Food Security
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Executive Director's Column: Cost of Obesity Tipping the Economic Scales

Although obesity has been an issue receiving inordinate attention over the past year or so, the focus has been on the adverse health outcomes associated with being overweight. The Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) recent release of a national study has now brought a new dimension to the table – economics. In the context of the debate surrounding national health care reform, the cost of obesity is taking center stage as the connection between rising obesity rates and rising medical spending can no longer be ignored.

To put the scope of the problem in perspective, the CDC estimates nearly 40 percent of American adults are considered obese based on their body mass index. Estimates of childhood obesity or overweight range anywhere between 17 percent and 22 percent. And the scales for both groups keep going up. More telling are statistics compiled by CDC indicating that 25 percent of obese children stay obese as adults and suffer a raft of serious health problems.

Regarding the economics of the problem, the CDC study pegged the cost of obesity-related illnesses – diabetes, heart disease, some forms of cancer and stroke – at \$147 billion per year, representing 9.1 percent of all medical spending in the United States. This is nearly double the spending attributable to patients who are overweight or obese than it was ten years ago.

Unfortunately, resolving the problem is much more difficult than identifying its scope or measuring its economic impact. Obesity has evolved beyond being a matter of counting calories and getting more exercise. In advancing 24 recommendations to deal with obesity focused on community and government action, the CDC-released study recognizes obesity as a result of not only individual choices, but also of negative changes in the social environment that have disproportionately affected poor and minority communities. The disappearance of supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods – replaced by convenience and corner stores that stock mostly processed food high in calories and low in nutrition, or, worse yet, the burgeoning of fast food outlets – has resulted in healthy food choices that are either non-existent or

priced beyond the means of many people trying to make it on food stamps.

One ray of hope where serious inroads in addressing obesity can be achieved pertain to children. With a concerted and persistent effort to get all schools engaged in the School Breakfast Program, and to get them, along with community-based organizations, to sponsor feeding sites through the Summer Food Service Program children will have healthy food options where currently little to none exist. These federally-subsidized meal programs have demonstrated success in enhancing the health outcomes of children, along with the added benefit that adequate nutrition improves their academic performance. Referring to the CDC research that 25% of obese children stay obese as adults should be motivation enough to get schools and sponsors on board with these programs.

Given obesity is a national health problem and a national economic problem shouldn't the fight against it be waged on as many fronts as possible?

*Joe Quattrocchi,
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State Budget Going Nowhere Fast

On Wednesday, August 5 Governor Rendell signed Senate Bill 850 into law and, through enacting Senate Republicans' budget plan, settled the impasse that has crippled the state since the July 1 deadline had long since passed. Well, no, not really.

His action was touted solely as a means to redress the logjam that is the annual state budget negotiations process. The opening line of the Governor's press release declared, "The legislation I signed earlier today was not a budget." He went on to rail against the spending plan as inadequate, out of balance (and therefore unconstitutional), and robbing young Pennsylvanians of future opportunities. Finally, he called on the legislative conference committee to get back to the negotiating table to work hand-in-glove until a suitable budget – i.e., one he will sign – is worked out. (More on that below.)

With several moves and counter-moves among the actors in this (not so much a) morality play, the crux of the stalemate remains: the Governor will not budge on what he considers the necessary investment to continue improvements made in education during his administration, while Senate Republicans (along with a few Blue Dog Democrats) insist that no existing taxes be raised or new ones instituted to pay for what they consider a bloated budget well beyond the means of the Commonwealth.

What the Governor did do in signing SB 850 was untangle this mess only to the extent that state employees could get paid and to ensure continuation of "essential public protection". In signing the measure, the Governor proclaimed "state employees protect the general public from crime, make sure the water we drink is clean,

insure the food we eat is safe, keep criminals behind bars, and care for children and adults facing serious health challenges". Bottom line, the emergency spending "bridge budget" of \$11 million – after blue lining 258 out of 386 General Fund appropriation lines – leaves no funding for a host of vital human services which include rape crisis, domestic violence, child care, child welfare and homeless services to name a few. This, five weeks after the new fiscal year was to begin.

And the most recent news is that the legislative conference committee meeting that was to have taken place on August 6 had been cancelled. And that no further meetings had been scheduled. And so the saga continues.....

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SNAP Improvements

The biggest news for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the Food Stamp Program) in Pennsylvania is that the PA Department of Public Welfare (DPW) has raised the gross income limits for the from 130% of poverty to **160%**. The change was effective July 27, and it is estimated that an additional 94,400 individuals will now be eligible for the program. This increase came about as a direct result of advocacy efforts of groups like Hunger Action that recognized the need of many whose gross incomes were disqualifying them despite their net incomes being well below the net income limits. Such households that will benefit the most from this change are those that have high child care expenses, shelter expenses, and/or pay child support.

DPW has also eliminated the net income test for all one and two-person households with gross incomes below 160% of the poverty guidelines and 200% for those containing at least one senior or disabled member. These households will now be eligible to receive at least \$16 a month regardless of their net income level. Seniors and households with unearned income and/or low shelter costs, who were once ineligible, will now be able to receive nearly \$200 a year in benefits.

In an attempt to make SNAP benefits more accessible, DPW has made one other improvement to the program. As of August 5, all SNAP application interviews are to be conducted over the telephone unless the applicant requests a face-to-face interview. Applicants are no longer required to declare or prove a hardship.

These changes could not come at a more opportune time as more and more Pennsylvanians struggle to put food on their tables. In July, **1 in 9** Pennsylvanians received SNAP benefits. If you consider the number of eligible individuals who are not currently enrolled in the program, the ratio would be even greater. Just between June and July, over 19,000 individuals enrolled into the program. Enrollment is up over 15% over last year with the number of SNAP applications submitted up nearly 23% between

June 2008 and 2009.

But at Hunger Action these numbers only serve to confirm what we have been hearing from the hundreds of calls we have been receiving monthly. People are hurting. They are struggling to pay bills, hold onto their homes, and find new jobs. And they are afraid because they don't know how they're going to be able to buy groceries next week. More and more people who thought they would never find themselves in such a situation are turning to SNAP for help. Thankfully, it is now there for more of them.

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Direct Certification Update

The Pennsylvania Department of Education posted (to COMPASS) an updated file in July with newly enrolled food stamp households by school district. That information can be used by districts in a data match - school enrollment against food stamp enrollment. Where a positive match occurs, children are then directly certified as eligible for free school meals, and no paper application is needed.

School Administrators are mandated by PDE to check this July list, and it is vitally important that they do so. Obviously since the list was last checked, unemployment has been on the rise and stories of layoffs have been commonplace. The latest food stamp enrollment numbers have certainly increased as well. So there are likely to be many more children eligible for free school meals since the last file update.

If PDE decides to post a second updated file, this would occur in January or February, and be entirely discretionary on the part of the school district, unlike the mandated July list.

Also, now is a good time to contact your local school district to make sure they provide a school breakfast program. We ask that you share your findings with Pennsylvania Hunger Action, especially in the event that a school would like to start a breakfast program, but needs assistance.

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Did You Know?

A record 33.8 million people received SNAP/Food Stamps in April, the fifth month of consecutive growth in participation. With an increase of 1.2 million people in just the past two months, one out of nine Americans now receive this government food support.

Source: US Department of Agriculture

Nearly one in five Hispanic households – in one of the richest countries in the world – suffers from hunger. This statistic, according to a recent report, indicates a disproportionate number of Hispanic households (19.5%) experience food insecurity (hunger) when compared to the national average (10.9%) and the non-Hispanic white average (7.8%).

Source: US Department of Agriculture

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