

Specter, Santorum, Platts Promote Child Nutrition

Pennsylvania's congressional delegation is stepping up to the plate for child nutrition.

Senator Arlen Specter announced on July 29th that he would join Senator Herb Kohl of Wisconsin in sponsoring three bills to improve the effectiveness of three nutrition programs.

- 1) S. 1020 would provide up to \$10 million annually in start-up grants for School Breakfast Programs and would direct the USDA to conduct universal school breakfast pilots in six school districts.
- 2) S. 1021 would provide up to \$5 million annually in start-up grants for Summer Food Service Programs, would simplify the reimbursement process for sponsors (the so-called Lugar Pilot), and would enable schools

attendance zones to qualify for open enrollment sites if 40 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced price lunches (currently it is 50 percent).

- 3) S.1022 would increase the administrative rate for sponsors of the Child and Adult Care Food Program serving rural areas, would enable daycare providers to qualify for Tier 1 rates if located in a school attendance zone in which 40 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced price lunches (currently it is 50 percent), and would expand from 7 to 13 the number of states that may offer suppers to at-risk children in after school programs.

Senator Specter has a history of taking a keen interest in the effective performance of federal food programs. Legislation that he co-sponsored in 1999 (the Hunger Relief Act) later became the basis for several key reforms in the Food Stamp Program.

In an equally important step, Senator Rick Santorum on June 16th called for improvements in child nutrition programs. In a letter to Senator Thad Cochran, chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Santorum stated: "In particular, I am concerned that there is a lack of adequate access to SFSP and CACFP in rural areas. ... In fact, 19 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties did not participate in

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Looking for \$ in All the Wrong Places

Where will Pennsylvania find the money to balance the budget, cut local property taxes and improve the education of our children? With lots of promising places to look, our state legislators seem most interested in two proposals that would, over the long term, do more harm than good.

Democrats in the General Assembly have fallen head-over-heels for slots. This trendy knockout promises to bring \$1 billion to Pennsylvania's coffers without causing any taxpayers to grumble or complain. Problem is, before the Commonwealth could collect the revenue, Pennsylvanians would have to spend lots of money (about \$3 billion) entertaining this sweet young thing. That's money we currently spend at other Pennsylvania businesses including grocery stores and supermarkets.

Most House Republicans, on the other hand, seem smitten with a cute little number called the 4 percent sales tax. This beguiling siren promises to raise more money for Pennsylvania by cutting 2 cents off the current rate while ending the exemptions for food and clothing. But there's a big problem here too. Seems that people who spend a big share of their income on food and clothing would end up paying more taxes than they do now. Any idea who those folks might be?

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More Dollars for Food

Low-income Pennsylvanians had an extra \$60 million in their pockets this past year to buy groceries. Where did the money come from? The Food Stamp Program (FSP).

Over the 12 months that ended in June, the USDA made \$750 million dollars available in Pennsylvania for food purchases, up from \$690 million in 2001-02. In May 826,050 households participated in the Program, up from 759,003 in the same month last year.

The increase is in part a reflection of the sluggish economy and the highest unemployment since 1994. But it also reflects improvements in the FSP enacted by Congress and implemented by the PA Department of Public Welfare, including the availability of benefits to more legal immigrants, the end of monthly reporting for working families, and an outreach initiative.

Rural counties lead the way in boosting enrollment. Juniata County has seen a 31 percent increase from May 2002 to May 2003 followed by Snyder (25 percent), Monroe (23 percent) and Perry (22 percent). Other counties with large increases were Centre and Lancaster (21 percent), Adams (20 percent), Susquehanna (19 percent), Berks and Lehigh (18 percent) and York (17 percent).

In May the counties with the highest FSP participation relative to poverty were Erie, Clearfield, Fayette, Elk and Greene.

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Pantry Equipment Requests Due

With the start of the new state fiscal year, it's again time for food pantries and soup kitchens to submit their requests for the equipment needed to handle food storage and distribution.

Refrigerators are a popular request by many local charities in order to handle the growing supply of fresh and frozen product that is available through TEFAP and the State Food Purchase Program. Other common requests are for freezers, freezer blankets and shelving for storage.

To get in line for funding, contact your county's lead agency and ask that your request be included in the county's State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) plan for 2003-04. To obtain the name and telephone number of your lead agency, call Hunger Action at 800-366-3997.

Contrary to rumors, the 2003-04 budget for the SFPP became law when Governor Rendell signed the budget bill back in March. The continued wrangling between Governor Rendell and the General Assembly about education funding and other issues should not delay in any way the normal flow of SFPP money to county lead agencies.

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There are better places to look for the money. The Governor, for example, has called for an increase in the Personal Income Tax and the closing of corporate loopholes. Both proposals would bring in needed revenue and neither would hurt those who can least afford it. But most legislators promised the folks back home that they wouldn't be caught dead in the company of such unfashionable solutions. If they ever walked into a party with a stodgy income tax increase on one arm, they may never be invited back.

So there you have it. Proposals that would solve the state's budgetary problems without causing more hunger are rejected out of hand as "politically impossible". Proposals that would cause more hunger are attracting lots of interest because they can be sold as trendy and pain-free.

Hunger Action is trying to change that. In a July 22nd letter to Senate leaders Robert Jubelirer, David Brightbill and Robert Mellow, Hunger Action urged the Senate to raise taxes rather than increase gaming. In support of this position the letter cited research showing that the incidence of problem gambling doubles within a radius of 50 miles around a place where a gaming facility is introduced and that the incidence of problem gambling falls disproportionately on the young, the less educated and the poor. "These are the same people who are most at risk of hunger."

And in a July 10th op-ed published by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and the Allentown Morning Call, Hunger Action reminded readers that extending the sales tax to food would make food more expensive. "A 4 percent sales tax on food purchased by a family of four over the course of a year would total \$223. What does \$223 mean to a low-income family of four? Over two weeks of groceries. For the parent earning \$5.50 an hour, it's a week of pay."

For Pennsylvanians concerned about ending hunger and reducing food insecurity, slot machines and a tax on food would make matters worse, not better. Don't be quiet about this; let your local legislators know.

Need to Know

On August 5th the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) announced a delay of its EITC pre-certification program until next year. This change is the result of a firestorm of objections to the IRS plan to require EITC filers to obtain proof that their children have resided with them for more than half a year. Most of the objections describe the “proof” required by the IRS as so burdensome that it would cause many eligible families to lose this important wage supplement.

The Summer Food Service Program has been in full swing for many local anti-hunger groups. According to information provided by the PA Department of Education, 27 new sponsors signed up for the Program this summer, bringing the total to 178. Thanks to strong programs in Philadelphia and Allegheny counties, Pennsylvania ranked 7th among the states in child participation in 2002. However, in much of rural Pennsylvania no children participated because there were no Program sponsors.

Congratulations to Just Harvest, a Center for Action Against Hunger in Pittsburgh, and the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank upon their selection as recipients of National Victory Against Hunger Awards by the Congressional Hunger Center in Washington, D.C. Just Harvest was selected for its work to promote the Summer Food Service Program in Allegheny County. The Food Bank was selected for its outreach to children through operation of an after-school network, a cooking and nutrition program, a farm stand, and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.

A new study published by the July 2003 issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* confirms the wrenching “heat or eat” choice faced by many low-income households. During the winter heating months caloric intake declined among adults by 8 percent, among adults with children by 12 percent, and among children by 11 percent.

The Food Trust (Philadelphia) and Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth report progress in their work with the School District of Philadelphia to develop a policy in regard to sugared drinks in schools. The two groups are asking the District to ban sodas and juice drinks that have less than 25 percent real fruit juice. On July 9th Paul Vallas, CEO of the Philadelphia School District, announced his agreement; he indicated that he would recommend that the only drink sales permitted in school building would be “drinks with nutritional value”. Vallas’ recommendation now goes to the School Reform Commission for final decision.

WIC participation exceeded 231,000 in May, the first time to reach that point since October 2000. WIC operations have benefited from strong and stable funding over the past two years. However, tougher times may soon return. For the new federal fiscal year starting in October Congress is poised to cut the President’s request for WIC by \$130 million. Other key funding decisions to be made by Congress in September will affect TEFAP and the Community Services Block Grant.

Do low-income kids in your community lack access to a summer meals program? If so, and if you are interested in working to change that next summer, call Sue at Hunger Action (717)233-6705. We are especially interested in starting programs in the following counties: Somerset, Bedford, Fulton, Huntingdon, Mifflin, Perry, Juniata, Montour, Bucks, Carbon, Wyoming, Sullivan, Clinton, Cameron, Elk, Jefferson, Forest, and Warren. Let’s make it happen!



**There are people in the world so hungry,
that God cannot appear to them
except in the form of bread.**

- Mahatma Gandhi



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SFSP (in 2002). Likewise, CACFP is seldom used in rural Pennsylvania because the widely dispersed population makes it more difficult for sponsors to run the program."

Santorum went on to urge the Committee to "evaluate the effectiveness of lowering the area eligibility requirements from 50 percent to 40 percent and of providing an increase in the administrative rates paid to CACFP sponsors serving rural areas."

In the House of Representatives, Congressman Todd Platts has taken the lead. In a July 31st letter to Rep. John Boehner, chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, Platts requested the Committee (of which Platts is a member) to "take special consideration of the needs of rural children". He asked the Committee to consider three changes: lowering area eligibility to 40 percent, increasing the administrative rate paid to CACFP sponsors, and implementing the Lugar Pilot.

Nine other Pennsylvania congressmen, including several with large rural constituencies, signed the Platts letter: Bill Shuster, Phil English, Joe Pitts, Don Sherwood, John Peterson, Tim Holden, Jim Greenwood, Jim Gerlach and Mike Doyle.

September will be a key month for child nutrition, as both the Senate Agriculture and House Education and Workforce committees will finalize their work on the programs referenced above as well as School Lunch and WIC. Readers are encouraged to thank their representatives for paying attention to child nutrition and to urge continued support for improvements in these programs.

THE PENNSYLVANIA HUNGER ADVOCATE

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The Center is a nonprofit organization dedicated to eliminating the causes of hunger through advocacy, education and collaboration. Supporters of this work include food providers, growers, religious organizations, food industry members, advocates and consumers.

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