

\$18 Million for State Food Purchase Program

Thanks to the advocacy of people across the State, the General Assembly did its part to prevent hunger when it authorized \$18 million for the State Food Purchase Program in the fiscal year that began July 1st. Rejecting Governor Rendell's proposal to cut food spending, the Assembly added \$550,000 to the appropriation, a 3 percent increase.

Local food pantries and cupboards have been struggling in recent months to close a gap created by growing need, rising energy and food costs, and a decline in the supply of federal TEFAP commodities. The increase authorized by the General Assembly will help close the gap.

Leaders from each of the four legislative caucuses were supportive of the increase. According to Berry Friesen of the PA Hunger Action Center, members of the Agriculture Committees were particularly helpful. "Mike Waugh, Michael

O'Pake, Art Hershey, Pete Daley – they were solidly behind an increase. So were the leaders of the appropriations committees. They know this program is effective at a local level. And they also began to see that cuts in food relief would only worsen the spending crisis the State faces in medical care."

In addition to the 3 percent, counties will see an increase because of a decision by the PA Department of Agriculture (PDA) to retain less from the appropriation to cover costs related to bonus TEFAP commodities. During 2004-05 PDA retained \$2 million for that purpose; this year it will retain only \$1 million, thus making an additional

million available for local distribution. While this will give counties more flexibility to purchase food locally, it will not increase the overall food supply because PDA will have fewer bonus commodities to distribute (less than one-half of what was available in 2002-03).

Among the organizations giving leadership to the effort to win an increase in funding were the PA Association of Regional Food Banks, the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger and the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Staff from many SFPP lead agencies also got involved by making telephone calls to local legislators.

240 Organizations Appeal to Santorum on FSP

More than 240 Pennsylvania organizations have asked Senator Rick Santorum for help in defeating an effort by the U.S. House of Representatives to change the basic structure of the Food Stamp Program (FSP). (See insert for text and list of organizations.)

The letter expresses alarm about provisions in H.R. 240 that "would profoundly weaken our national food safety net" and "tear America's food safety net into fifty small pieces." The specific provisions include block grants, spending caps and the grant of unprecedented authority for the U.S.D.A. to approve state waiver requests related to the FSP. If these House provisions are adopted by the Senate, the letter states, "the Program would become more complicated, more error-prone, less reliable for needy families and less credible to the general public." The letter's signers include religious congregations, civic organizations, labor unions, health and education associations, representatives of the food industry and other businesses.

According to his staff, Santorum likes the idea of giving states more flexibility to operate social service programs but has not decided whether or not to support the FSP changes proposed by the House. The Senate schedule will require his decision in September.

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Food Stamp Pilot for Seniors

Only about 30 percent of eligible seniors are enrolled in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). This is because many are reluctant to visit county offices long associated with "welfare" and because at least some seniors have difficulty managing the paperwork and office-visits required by the FSP.

The PA Department of Public Welfare (DPW) and the Social Security Administration (SSA) are addressing this problem through an initiative called the Combined Application Project. Starting in early 2006, the two offices will automatically enroll Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients in the FSP. Recipients will enroll in food stamps through the social security office, receive their EBT debit cards in the mail and receive their pinning instructions by telephone – all without ever visiting the county assistance office.

To achieve this, some of the precise targeting of the FSP will be lost. Seniors who are part of the pilot will be grouped into four benefit levels depending on income level, household composition and shelter costs; individuals within each level will receive a standard amount. The lowest of the four benefit levels is expected to be at least \$20 and the highest at least \$90.

Similar pilots are currently operating on at least a county level in six other states and have produced increases of 20-35 percent increases in FSP enrollment among seniors. DPW will operate the PA pilot statewide. It has requested help from community based organizations in publicizing this new initiative.

COMPASS to Include School Meals

Confirming eligibility for free and reduced-price school meals is a huge job. Paperwork must flow through the hands of teachers to children to parents and then back to the school. Each application must be scrutinized. Family income fluctuates over time, adding another variable.

To lighten the burden, Pennsylvania has a system whereby children from families enrolled in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) are certified eligible for school meals without going through this hassle. This involves the transfer of information from the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) to the Department of Education (PDE) and then on to the school districts. But even this system is cumbersome and time-consuming.

All of this will soon get easier in Pennsylvania. PDE is piloting a new system that will enable school districts to use COMPASS to identify children who are enrolled in the FSP. Moreover, COMPASS will be modified so that families not enrolled in the FSP will be able to apply on-line for free or reduced-price school meals.

The following districts will participate in the COMPASS pilot this coming school year: Lancaster, Reading, Harrisburg City, Pottstown, Susquehanna Township, Wayne Highlands, Williamsport, Armstrong, Mechanicsburg, Carlisle, Cumberland Valley, Pittsburgh, Allentown City, Hempfield, Chambersburg, and Conrad Weiser.

Pat Birkenshaw, Chief of the Division of Child Nutrition at PDE, expects that this method of direct certification will be available statewide in 2006-07.

Phila. Study Focuses on Healthy Snacks

A Philadelphia study funded by the Center on Disease Control has found that more than half of 5th grade children bought snacks at corner stores during their walks to and from school. On a daily basis, the purchases averaged \$2 per child, much of it on foods high in sugar and fat.

Small differences in food selection can cause huge differences in health. For example, a 20-ounce soda (\$1.29 and 240 calories) and a candy bar (\$0.75 and at least 200 calories) yield about 20 percent of the 2,200 calories required daily by a typical child. If the child is already reaching this caloric level through food consumed at other meals, the excess of 440 calories could add more than one-half pound of weight each week.

Not surprisingly, the study found that schools with the highest percentage of overweight children have twice as many "food opportunities" (such as nearby corner grocery stores) as schools with the lowest percentage of overweight students.

The Food Trust is working with corner store owners to promote healthier snack food choices to young children. Through their Snack Smart social marketing campaign, displays of healthy food have been created and located in stores to attract and provide kids with an easy way to choose healthier snacks and beverages. Other project partners in the study are the University of Pennsylvania's Cartographic Modeling Laboratory and the Medical School's Weight and Eating Disorders Program.

Worth Noting

Funding for Food Stamp Program to be Cut. Under the budget resolution adopted by Congress in late April, the House and Senate Agriculture Committees must come up with \$3 billion in cuts from mandatory (entitlement) spending. At risk are food stamps, rural conservation and crop subsidies. Because most Ag Committee members are from states where large farms rely on crop subsidies, food stamps and rural conservation are in particular jeopardy. To make matters worse, national agri-business groups have urged Congress to cut half of the \$3 billion out of nutrition. Congressman Tim Holden is the second-ranked Democrat on the House Ag Committee; his staff said he is fighting hard to avoid cuts in rural conservation spending. Senator Rick Santorum chairs the Agriculture Subcommittee on Research, Nutrition and General Legislation; his staff said he will oppose attempts to cut food stamps by more than the \$600 million proposed by President Bush.

DPW Rewarded for Low Error Rate. In late July, the USDA awarded PA \$5,010,200 for achieving one of the lowest Food Stamp Program error rates in the nation during 2004. The achievement marks a dramatic turnaround for DPW; only two years ago it was penalized by the USDA because of too many errors. The improvement is even more remarkable when one considers that it was achieved during a time that DPW also was implementing policies to expand eligibility among households with earned income. (Enrollment by such households has increased by 62 percent over the past three years.) DPW Secretary Estelle Richman has broad discretion in what she decides to do with the money. Design changes in DPW's computers and an expansion of food stamp outreach are possibilities.

Food Frugality Challenge. The Second Harvest Food Bank of Lehigh Valley and Northeast PA arranged for 21 individuals to live one week on a Food Stamp Program budget of 89 cents per meal. Participants kept a food diary, recording all food eaten and any emotional, physical and social changes. Participants reported decreases in food intake and in the variety of foods consumed. Consumption of dairy products, fruits and vegetables declined most significantly. About 80 percent reported a physical symptom of hunger (fatigue, headache or stomach ache) and nearly half reported an emotional symptom of hunger (depression, anxiety, difficulty concentrating). To obtain a copy of the full report contact Jessica Dreistadt at 610-434-0875 or jdreistadt@caclv.org.

Team Nutrition Grant. PA has been awarded \$178,000 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to expand nutrition education in the schools. The PA Department of Education (PDE) plans to use the money to offer mini-grants to 20 after-school programs. Targeted programs will be those that receive funding through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. Awardees will be required to implement lessons from the USDA's "Power of Choice" and "Recharge," an Action for Healthy Kids' After School Program. Grant application materials and a web site will be developed this fall. PDE plans to begin accepting Team Nutrition grant applications from schools in the Spring of 2006.

Common Sense on Sales Tax. Two members of the PA House are proposing a sensible approach to reduce school-based property taxes. Kerry Benninghoff (R-Centre/Mifflin) and Mario Scavello (R-Monroe) would accomplish this by broadening the 6 percent sales tax to include more service-related items as well as sporting events, candy and magazines. In contrast to the proposal from the Commonwealth Caucus, they would not tax groceries, clothing and prescription drugs. Only a few states (Alaska, Arkansas, Hawaii, Mississippi, South Carolina, Utah and West Virginia) tax grocery purchases as proposed by the Commonwealth Caucus; these states are among the very worst when it comes to hunger.

What Fiscal Discipline? According to the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, Congress has already exceeded the limits of the 2005-06 budget resolution by \$3.2 billion. The Committee cites four actions: a supplemental for the war in Iraq; a supplemental for veteran's health care; the recently-passed energy bill; and the recently-passed highway bill. What is becoming clear is that for the current Congress fiscal discipline is a pick-and-choose kind of thing. When it's politically convenient to do so, the limits are simply ignored.

PA NEN Intergenerational Strategies Seminar
(State College) on September 19th
Register: panen@pahunger.org or 717.233.1791

Bucks County Hunger and Nutrition Coalition Fall Forum (Bucks Co. Community College) on October 7th
Register: nstellfox@bcoc.org or 215.345.8175 ext. 213

Philadelphia's World Food Day Celebration
(William J. Green Federal Building) on October 28th
Register: info@hungercoalition.org or 215.430.0555



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Economists Support Raising Minimum Wage

Forty Pennsylvania economists have voiced support for an increase in the minimum wage. Their statement follows. For the list of signers, go to www.paminimumwage.com.

"The minimum wage has been an important part of Pennsylvania's economy for more than six decades. It is based on the principle of valuing work by establishing an hourly wage floor beneath which employers cannot pay their workers. In so doing, the minimum wage helps to equalize the imbalance in bargaining power that low-wage workers face in the labor market. The minimum wage is also an important tool in fighting poverty.

"Pennsylvania's minimum wage is currently set equal to the federal minimum wage, now \$5.15 per hour. The last increase in the federal minimum wage occurred in 1997. The value of that increase has been fully eroded. The real value of today's PA's minimum wage is less than it has been in 43 out of the last 45 years. Moreover, the PA minimum wage is now only 37% of the state's median hourly wage, its lowest level since at least 1979. This decline is causing hardship for low-wage workers and their families.

"Fifteen states, including Pennsylvania's neighbors New York, New Jersey, and Delaware, have acted to set their minimum wages above the federal level. Additional states, including Maryland and Ohio, are considering similar measures.

"We believe that a modest increase in the state's minimum wage would improve the well-being of low-wage workers and would not have the adverse effects that critics have claimed. In particular, we share the view the Council of Economic Advisers expressed in the 1999 Economic Report of the President that "the weight of the evidence suggests that modest increases in the minimum wage have had very little or no effect on employment." While controversy about the precise employment effects of the minimum wage continues, research has shown that most of the beneficiaries are adults, most are female, and the vast majority are members of low-income working families.

"As economists who are concerned about the problems facing low-wage workers, we believe that a phased-in increase in the Pennsylvania minimum wage in the range of \$1.00 to \$2.00 falls within the range of options where the benefits to the labor market, workers, and the overall economy would be positive."

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