

Food Stamp Cuts Hanging in the Balance

As Congress struggles to complete a budget, funding for the Food Stamp Program (FSP) remains unresolved. The Senate seems to want to leave America's most important food assistance program undisturbed. The House wants to implement a cut.

On October 18, the Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Republican Saxby Chambliss of Georgia, unveiled his plan to save \$3 billion over the five years in agricultural spending. To the relief of millions of families, the plan made no cuts in the FSP. On the other hand, the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Republican Bob Goodlatte of Virginia, has repeatedly voiced his intention to make cuts. Goodlatte is sure to find support from fiscal conservatives who want to pay for Hurricane Katrina by "offsets", meaning cuts in other programs. These two factors,

combined with the priority among House leaders for tax cuts above everything else, make it likely the House will end up at a very different place than the Senate.

Last January, President Bush called for \$600 million in FSP cuts through a narrowing of categorical eligibility, a policy whereby families receiving a TANF-funded service qualify for food stamps without going through the full eligibility process. It is not known how many Pennsylvania families would be affected by such a change. Pennsylvania is not one of the dozen states that have aggressively utilized this procedure.

In an October 5th letter, Rick Santorum

earlier indicated support for the President's proposal. "I believe (clarifying the law in regard to categorical eligibility) is a way to reduce spending in this program without narrowing eligibility or reducing benefits for needy households in Pennsylvania or in most other states. However, as we move forward . . . I wanted to inform you that I will have serious concerns with any amendments that may be offered that would find additional savings through nutrition programs."

With the final budget expected soon, readers are urged to contact House members promptly. As it says in the ancient book of Proverbs, "Speak up for those who cannot speak."

IN THIS ISSUE

**October 2005
Volume XXVI Issue V**

Santorum	2
Heating Assistance	3
Director's Column	3
Working More for Less	4
Board Resolutions	5
Supermarket Access	5
MyPyramid for Kids	6
Prioritizing Nutrition	7

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What's Happening With TEFAP?

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) was the main topic of discussion September 14th at the meeting of the Emergency Food Assistance Advisory Committee at the PA Department of Agriculture (PDA). Barry Shutt, director of the Bureau of Food Distribution, reported that PDA had delivered 781,787 cases of TEFAP food during the fiscal year ending June 30 compared to 835,133 cases in 2003-04 and 719,651 cases in 2002-03. He expects to deliver between 750,000 and 800,000 cases in the current fiscal year.

Members of the Committee voiced complaints from food pantries that the volume and variety of TEFAP product had declined over the past two years. Because of the steady increase in the number of people needing help with food, Committee members asked PDA to do everything in its power to restore former volume and variety. Shutt stated that it had long been PDA's policy to accept all available TEFAP product.

The PA Association of Regional Food Banks (PARF) is studying the problem and has contacted other states to identify potential solutions. Pantry and cupboard managers with concerns or suggestions about TEFAP are invited to contact Sheila Christopher, executive director of PARF (sachristopher@comcast.net), or Sue Mitchem at Hunger Action.

Still Waiting for Santorum

It's been two months since Senator Rick Santorum received a call for help from over 240 Pennsylvania organizations and businesses. And we're still on hold, waiting for his answer.

The call for help was delivered August 18th. It asked the Senator to publicly oppose provisions in a House bill (H.R. 240) that would end the national structure of the Food Stamp Program and invite states to begin taking it apart.

Karen Wilson of the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, Dennis McManus of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, and Berry Friesen of Hunger Action met with Santorum in his Washington office on September 20 to again ask for the Senator's commitment. But he declined to take a position.

Senator Arlen Specter hasn't had the same difficulty making up his mind; he came out against the House plan to dismantle the Food Stamp Program over two years ago.

As they have repeatedly done in the past three-and-one-half years, House leaders are expected to press ahead with their plans for food stamps as part of a TANF reauthorization proposal. Because TANF expires at the end of December, the Senate will be forced to deal with the House plan later this fall, perhaps in November.

In addition to Santorum, anti-hunger advocates have focused their efforts on Georgia Senator Saxby Chambliss, who chairs the Senate committee that provides oversight for the Food Stamp Program. Speaking to lobbyists on October 5, Chambliss praised the Food Stamp Program as a "first responder" in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and said this success was largely a result of its national structure. He committed himself to oppose any structural changes.

Pennsylvania continues to wait for Senator Santorum to do the same.

PA Nutrition Education Program Approved

On September 20th, the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) approved the Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Program (PA NEP) for the new federal fiscal year. This qualifies the PA NEP to receive \$15 million in federal funds to match an equal level of state funds. All funds are used to provide science-based nutrition education to food stamp eligible households. Fifteen local organizations are included in the 2006 plan, working in a total of 36 counties, with programs as small as \$23,000 and as large as \$3 million. The PA NEP is administered by Penn State University under a contract with the PA Department of Public Welfare. Dr. Barbara Lohse of the Nutrition Department at Penn State is the principle investigator.

Included in the recent approval is the work plan of the PA Nutrition Education Network (PA NEN). This arm of the PA NEP serves the broader program by fostering collaboration, best practices, research and professional development among individuals who provide nutrition education to food stamp eligible households. It also interacts with the general public to raise awareness and improve understanding of the challenges faced by low-income households trying to eat healthily on a limited income. During the coming year, the PA NEN work plan includes the following items.

- * A feasibility study of working with grocery stores to increase fruit and vegetable purchases by food stamp households through cash register coupons and nutrition messages.
- * Coordination of Pennsylvania's State Nutrition Action Plan, which includes the assembling and posting of vegetable-of-the-month materials on the PA NEN's new website.
- * In collaboration with Aging, two regional workshops for paraprofessionals providing nutrition education in senior centers.
- * In collaboration with a local agency yet to be named, nutrition workshops for grassroots providers to prepare participants to conduct peer-to-peer nutrition education in congregations, food pantries and other community settings.
- * In collaboration with the dairy councils, promotional and educational activities in low-income schools to promote participation in school breakfast.

Staff will continue to provide opportunities for professional development through the PA NEN member listserv, the recently redesigned web-based newsletter, the new PA NEN website and an annual conference. The PA NEN also is developing a database and mapping system to be a clearinghouse of nutrition education in the State of Pennsylvania.

For more information and/or to join the PA NEN, visit <http://panen.psu.edu>.

Rendell Seeks Heating Assistance

With home energy costs expected to jump by as much as 40 percent this winter, Governor Edward Rendell has assembled a multi-pronged initiative to assist low-income households. "We're taking action now to make sure our neediest citizens can meet their winter heating bills this year," said Rendell. "We're committed to protecting our most vulnerable and providing the help they need."

Called "Stay Warm PA", the initiative announced on October 19th contains the following elements.

- * A request to the General Assembly to authorize \$15 million in state money to help pay winter utility bills. Currently no state funds are provided for this purpose.
- * A challenge to the state's major utilities to double enrollment in the Consumer Assistance Program and increase their funding of that Program. "Large energy companies need to voluntarily share some of their profits to help needy citizens cover their heating expenses," said Rendell. According to a press release from the Governor's Office, utility companies are currently required to pay \$212 million toward these costs.
- * A challenge to utility companies to offer payment plans to households facing termination of service and to agree not to charge families under 250 percent of poverty more than \$50 up front for a reconnect fee and no more than \$100 for a deposit upon being reconnected.
- * An agreement with Lowe's home improvement centers to provide weatherization workshops (together with free materials) at senior centers and other locations.
- * A statewide summit on November 1st to "mobilize an army of volunteers to weatherize homes, assist the frail and collectively address the winter heating crisis."

The governor also promised to seek additional federal funding for LIHEAP and directed that thermostats in state buildings be turned down to 68 degrees.

PA Legislative Session Calendar



November: 1-2, 3*, 14-16, 21*, 22*

December: 5-7, 12-14, 19*

* House only

Director's Column



We've been trying to pay attention to Congress as it prepares a budget for 2006. It's tedious but important all the same. Here's what we see happening.

The chickens (all those tax cuts from the first four years of the Bush Administration) are coming home to roost and the federal government is going ever deeper into debt. Even though the tax cuts have caused much more of the red ink than spending has, Congress plans to address the problem by slashing programs (like food stamps) that help the little guy.

The budget Congress has been working on this year would make matters worse. It would reduce spending by \$35 billion and cut taxes by at least \$70 billion, thus digging the hole deeper while Congress pretends to be filling it in. Of course, Katrina-related costs are adding billions more to the deficit. Who will pay for that? House leaders want the little guy to foot the bill through even deeper cuts in Medicaid and food stamps.

Back in April, Congress adopted special rules for this year's budget. Usually legislation does not pass the Senate unless it has the support of 60 members, which is the number required to cut off debate. Under the special "reconciliation" rules in use this year, only 50 votes are needed to end Senate debate. This increases the chances that the Senate will go along with the House and adopt more tax cuts for wealthy special interests.

Meanwhile, Congress continues to spend huge amounts of borrowed money whenever they think it will improve their chances of being re-elected. That's how we got the Medicare prescription drug program, which in its first five years will cost \$400 billion more than President Bush said it would. That's how we got transportation legislation this past summer loaded with \$25 billion in pork.

Let's not let our Washington representatives fool us. They're not serious about the red ink. If they cut food stamps, it's only so they can spend more money on their expensive incumbent protection schemes.

Working More For Less

According to a study conducted by the Work and Family Program of the New America Foundation, low- and middle-incomes are falling even though productivity is higher than it's been in 30 years.

In the past, median families' real income grew in "lockstep" with productivity. That is, as workers accomplished more, they were rewarded with pay increases of equal value. But from 1973 to 2003, median family income grew at only one-third the rate of productivity. The "extra" value went to shareholders.

As this trend continued, wages and benefits in jobs available to low- and middle-income families declined. To compensate, many working families began working more hours. Between 1979 and 2000, married-couple families with children increased hours worked by 16 percent, or almost 500 annual hours. Without this increase in hours worked, middle-income families would have experienced an average real income increase of only 5 percent while lower-income families would have experienced a decrease in real income by 13.9 percent (and by 4.6 percent in the second quintile) over that period.

In most cases, this increase in hours worked was accomplished by the mother getting a job outside the home. As one would expect, this dramatically changed the demographics of the workforce. Between 1970 and 2000, the percentage of mothers in the workforce rose from 38 to 67 percent while fathers worked no fewer hours than before. This left a gap at home and the need for new support services to fill the gap. Often, however, these support services – subsidized child care and after-school care – failed to grow sufficiently to replace the parental hours once devoted to family care that now are devoted to market work.

Another problem in many workplaces is that employers do not permit employees to flex their hours in order to juggle work and caregiving. Because many women, mothers in particular, work part-time, nonstandard jobs, they not only have less flexibility, but also earn \$3.97 less per hour than regular full-time workers. Furthermore, women with children make 10 to 15 percent less than women without children.

These factors all contributed to increased levels of family stress. In 2002, 45 percent of employees reported that work and family responsibilities interfered with each other "a lot" or "some". A full 67 percent of employed parents felt that they did not have enough time with their children. Working parents with school-age children who worked in inflexible workplaces and had children in unsupervised settings were 4.5 times more likely to report low psychological well-being than their counterparts with more workplace flexibility and better after-school options. In addition, working mothers lost the equivalent of one night of sleep a week compared to mothers who were not in the workforce.

Furthermore, research has found that the more parents are away in the afternoons and evenings, the more likely it is that their children will fall to the bottom on achievement tests.

While increased parental work hours have negative consequences, families cannot easily give up the income of two parents. Benefit coverage is shrinking while living costs have increased. And according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, wage growth for blue collar manufacturing and non-managerial service workers (constituting about 80 percent of the workforce) for 2004 was about 1 percent below inflation. In other words, even with the extra hours, families were slipping behind.

The authors of the paper offer three proposals to increase earned income: macroeconomic measures (e.g., full employment, thereby pushing up wages); new investments in education and training to create and keep high-wage jobs in the US; and tax measures, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and child care tax credit, to make work more profitable. In addition, they urge employers to make jobs more flexible so parents can better balance the responsibilities of home and family.

For the full report, go to http://www.newamerica.net/Download_Docs/pdfs/Doc_File_2437_1.pdf.

Raise Minimum Wage, Don't Tax Food

Meeting September 12th in Harrisburg, Hunger Action's Board of Directors adopted policy positions on two issues likely to come up in the General Assembly later this fall.

The first was a call to the Pennsylvania General Assembly to raise the minimum wage to \$6.25 per hour effective January 1, 2006, to \$7.15 per hour effective January 1, 2007, and annually thereafter based on increases in the cost of living. In reaching this decision, the Board confronted the argument that a raise in the minimum would cost Pennsylvania jobs.

"We recognize that an increase in the minimum wage may prompt some employers to reduce their work forces and cause others to delay hiring. However, we are not persuaded that this impact would be widespread or that it is the decisive factor. Other employee protections, including workers' compensation insurance, unemployment insurance and social security contributions, impose a cost on employers and thus cause some contraction in the number of jobs. To erode the minimum wage because that creates a few additional jobs is no more persuasive to us than it would be to create jobs by eliminating other employee protections."

The Board stated that its primary concern was to restore the buying power of low-wage employment so that people who have employment no longer needed to worry about hunger.

The Board's second action was to call on the General Assembly to reform property taxes without taxing food purchased for home consumption.

"Shelter (like food) is a necessity and securing affordable shelter is rendered more difficult by the current practice of levying taxes on residential real estate. Thus, we commend members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly who are giving leadership to the effort to lighten the burden of taxation on primary residences, whether those residences are owned or leased."

But the Board said it would be a mistake to start taxing food because it would make food more expensive and take money out of the pockets of those least able to pay. "Many low-income households are renters who currently pay property taxes through their monthly rent. Their rental payments would likely not be reduced by a reduction or elimination of property taxes, especially if landlords had higher costs related to the broadening of the sales tax to include services. We believe it would be unconscionable for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to increase the burden of taxes already borne by these low-income renters."

The Board directed staff to communicate these actions to Assembly leaders and to Governor Rendell. To express your view on these subjects, use Hunger Action's website at www.pahunger.org.

Is There a Grocery Store Near You?

Many low-income families do not have access to a grocery store that offers a quality selection of products at modest prices. That makes it virtually impossible to afford a balanced diet that includes fresh fruits and vegetables.

Utilizing a \$10 million investment by the Rendell Administration, the Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) is working to change that through grants and loans to businesses that want to start or expand grocery stores in under-served areas.

Hannah Burton of The Food Trust in Philadelphia is monitoring the impact of the Initiative and promoting its expansion. She reports that to date 23 projects have been approved for eligibility and eight have received funding commitments. The eight stores are located in Philadelphia, Eddystone, Darby, Gettysburg, and Pittsburgh and involve total project costs of more than \$22 million. The FFFI has committed \$6,685,000 million in grants and loans to leverage this investment. These eight projects will result in the creation of more than 1,000 new jobs and represent approximately 290,000 square feet of new retail space.

Projects in the financing pipeline are diverse in size, ranging from a 1,000 square foot produce store to a 57,000 square foot full service supermarket. The Initiative is going so well that Governor Rendell's 2006 budget invested an additional \$10 million, which will be leveraged to create an \$80 million financing pool.

The lead partners in the venture are the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development and The Reinvestment Fund, a nonprofit lender.

Nutrition Bills Need a Boost

A trio of bills passed by the Pennsylvania House of Representatives to improve nutrition and exercise in the schools (H.B. 185, 189 and 191) are awaiting action in the Senate. According to staff for the Senate Education Committee, the three bills, dubbed 'Eat Well, Learn Well, Live Well', are not scheduled for attention anytime soon.

Hunger Action has asked Senate Education Committee chairman Jim Rhoades to use HB 191 as a vehicle to make School Health Advisory Councils a standard part of every school district. "We believe that School Health Advisory Councils would institutionalize an annual process of public discussion and review. Over time this would lead to the adoption of sound local nutrition policies."

Some school districts are already establishing School Health Advisory Councils. According to a study by Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity (PANA), such schools are the leaders in improving the school environment. PANA's findings are based on data collected during the first full year of its Keystone Healthy Zones initiative. According to a PANA report, "The existence of a School Health Council is the leading indicator of whether schools have written policies about nutrition, are making nutrition environment improvements, offer more minutes of physical education, and offer more opportunities for physical activity."

Such councils include within their memberships school administrators, school food service staff, school nurses, parents, students and representatives of other family and community organizations. Generally they report at least annually to the school board on a variety of factors related to the school environment, including the nutritional value of the meals, access to fresh fruits and vegetables, access to competitive food and beverages in the lunchroom and in vending machines, and access to the School Breakfast and Summer Food Service programs.

MyPyramid for Kids Released

For the first time, the USDA has created a kid-friendly food pyramid. *MyPyramid for Kids* is aimed at children ages 6 to 11, combining dietary advice with the internet, using an interactive game, lesson plans, colorful posters, flyers, and tips for families to promote healthy lifestyles.

The messages in the new pyramid are not different from the adult version. The junior MyPyramid features information based on the 2005 guidelines, encouraging children to eat more brightly-colored fruits and vegetables; chose whole grains, low-fat dairy products, and lean protein; and limit processed foods and drinks, especially those with unhealthy fat and added sugar. Physical activity is a big part of the kids' pyramid. *MyPyramid for Kids* shows a cartoon figure running up the pyramid, as in the adult version. However, kids are encouraged to get 60 minutes of physical activity per day, two times the minimum recommendation for healthy adults.

In announcing the new design, USDA Secretary Mike Johanns said: "This is a fun approach to addressing the very serious problem of childhood obesity. Messages about the importance of healthy eating and physical activity will take hold through the online pyramid's features and interactive game."

Will *MyPyramid for Kids* actually appeal to kids? A lot of good information is provided on the site; the materials are colorful and fun looking. Yet, the main page on the website for kids does not even include pictures. Some of the activities seem to be complex for the younger age groups. The MyPyramid Worksheet asks kids to identify food goals based on ounce equivalents and cups. How many adults are accurately able to identify an ounce of meat? The interactive game, "Blast Off," teaches kids how to reach Planet Power by fueling their rocket with food and physical activity. A wrong choice (for example, soda or chips) causes the rocket to sputter and cough black smoke. It's not always clear why the rocket did not take off, which may be confusing for the younger children; the older age bracket may get bored from the game after playing it once.

MyPyramid for Kids may be a better tool for teacher and parents interested in teaching kids about healthy living. Lesson plans, grouped in sections of three, are age-appropriate, providing nutrition and physical activity information that can be included in core curriculum. Parent outreach materials are provided with many of the lesson plans. Messages would best be conveyed if children and adults sat down together.

MyPyramid for Kids does get the right message to kids, through their own efforts or via teachers and parents, to "Eat Right. Exercise. Have Fun." See MyPyramid for Kids yourself at <http://www.mypyramid.gov/kids>.

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.

Bucks Co. Group Meets

The 4-year old Hunger Nutrition Coalition of Bucks County met October 7 to assess the state of local food security. According to Roger Collins, executive director of the Bucks County Opportunity Council, over the past two years the 35 food pantries in the County experienced a 21 percent increase in the number of households served. Sixty percent of those served by the food pantries were part of households where someone was employed or looking for work. And 60 percent worried that their families were not getting the right kind of food, up from 39 percent two years ago.

Yvette Jackson, administrator of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office of the Food and Nutrition Service, also spoke at the meeting. She emphasized that food stamps are nutrition, not welfare, and that the Program's payment accuracy rate is higher today than at any point in the Program's 40-year history. Pennsylvania has seen a 39 percent increase in participation over the past five years but still serves only about six out of ten eligible households.

*Let us sit down soon to eat
With all those who haven't eaten,
Let us spread great tablecloths,
Put salt in the lakes of the world,
Set up planetary bakeries,
Tables with strawberries in the
snow,
And a plate like the moon itself
From which we will all eat.
For now I ask no more
Than the justice of eating.*

~ Pablo Neruda



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Wages Not Keeping Up

Pennsylvania workers have gained little or nothing from the economic recovery that began in late 2001. That is the key finding of the Keystone Research Center in its latest report, *The State of Working Pennsylvania 2005*.

Inflation-adjusted hourly earnings of typical low-wage Pennsylvania workers fell in 2004 to \$7.16 an hour, 10 cents lower than 2003 and 15 cents lower than 2001. If employed full-time and year-around, their annual income was about \$14,900, below poverty for a family of three. Median-wage workers earned \$14.08 an hour in 2004, up 13 cents from 2003 and 9 cents from 2001. High-wage workers earned \$30.07 in 2004, a decline of 84 cents from 2003 and 8 cents from 2001.

According to the report, "This stagnation coupled with rising gas prices helps explain the intensity of public reaction to the 16-34 percent pay increases enacted for members of the General Assembly in July. This reaction, in turn, has left the legislature searching for ways to demonstrate its concern for the average Pennsylvanian."

The report goes on to offer a specific recommendation: raise the state's minimum wage and protect it against future erosion by inflation through an automatic annual cost-of-living adjustment. "A hike to \$7.15 per hour from the current \$5.15 would benefit an estimated 860,000 Pennsylvania workers and their families, helping them avoid difficult choices this winter between heating the house and keeping food on the table." About one-third of the dollars from a hike in the minimum wage would go to the poorest fifth of Pennsylvania households. Seventy-one percent of the beneficiaries would be age twenty and older. About 20 percent work as cashiers, retail salespersons, and as counter and rental clerks. Another 14 percent work as cooks, dishwashers, and wait staff.

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