

School Meals at Risk

The federal government, deeply in debt due to a slow economy, tax cuts and the war in Iraq, is scrounging for money from the School Breakfast and School Lunch programs. That appears to be the bottom line of a behind-the-scenes effort in Congress to impose new verification requirements on schools and on the families of children who request free or reduced-price breakfast or lunch.

Late last year, representatives of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) within the USDA began to quietly report to Congress that up to a quarter of the free breakfasts and lunches were going to children who should be paying. To correct the problem, they suggested that schools require more paperwork from parents who apply for free or reduced price meals. A hard look at the data behind this allegation showed that the FNS has greatly exaggerated the problem. Nevertheless, even as FNS began to backtrack from its earlier

statements, the perception persisted that something is amiss in the school meals programs and that money is being wasted.

Among the fixes under consideration is an increase in the number of applications that must be "verified" by independent documentation such as pay stubs. Currently schools must verify 3 percent of family applications.

Recent data collected by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. in a study for FNS suggests the folly of this approach. It studied the results of two pilot projects designed to improve the accuracy of school certification of eligibility for free and reduced-price meals. The first, Up-Front Documentation, involved

nine schools and required students to provide documentation of income at the time of their application. The second, Graduated Verification, involved three schools and required those schools to substantially increase the sample of applications that had to be verified after the student had been certified. Its conclusions follow.

1. Most of the errors in school certifications involved children receiving free meals when they should have been receiving reduced-price meals. In other words, their family incomes were just above (rather than just below) 130 percent of poverty. Only 5.5 percent of students certified for free meals should have been paying full price.

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WIC to Revamp Nutrition Education

Following recommendations of the Food and Nutrition Board of the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the WIC Program will soon make major changes in its approach to nutrition education. The changes will entail dropping the 24-hour food recall questionnaire that has been a standard part of the WIC assessment for nearly 30 years. In its place will be a new assessment tool, which is currently being fine-tuned.

Speaking September 3rd at the annual meeting of the National Advisory Council on Maternal, Infant and Fetal Nutrition in Alexandria, USDA representative Donna Hines described the Value-Enhanced Nutrition Assessment (VENA), which will enable WIC staff to identify critical nutrition issues in each family. This will enable staff to tailor the educational message to each family's need. Although WIC's previous approach was supposed to accomplish this as well, the USDA has concluded that it fell short of the mark. According to the IOM, the recall questionnaires were not reliable. Moreover, WIC moms found the process to be tedious and less than helpful.

WIC is generally regarded as the premier nutrition program, providing education, breastfeeding counseling and prescribed food for nearly half of

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Hunger Task Force Hosts Greenwood

Nearly 40 percent of people who requested help from Bucks County social service agencies this past summer ran out of food by the end of the month. That is the key finding of the Hunger Nutrition Task Force (HNTF) of Bucks County, which released its report October 3rd in Langhorne.

Roger Collins, Director of Bucks County Opportunity Council, presented the sobering report to a group of 75 community leaders that included Congressman Jim Greenwood, who represents Bucks County in Washington. Collins highlighted the changing profile of the at-risk households: in 40 percent the head-of-household was employed, in 24 percent s/he was unemployed and looking for work, and in 12 percent the members of the household were retired and living on fixed incomes. Only one-third were enrolled in the Food Stamp Program. Collins called on all Bucks County organizations concerned with health and nutrition to become active in the Task Force.

In response, Greenwood took a nuts-and-bolts approach to hunger. "It seems that the resources are available but that we need to address problems of access," he said. The audience then followed with a lively exchange of suggestions. "Why do we insist that seniors go to the welfare office to get help with food?" asked one audience member. "Don't we understand what 'the welfare office' means to persons of that generation?" Another called for evening office hours so that parents don't need to miss work to apply for food stamps. Others described improvements in WIC participation since public transportation routes were changed to match clinic locations. A few ventured into more

controversial issues, including the war in Iraq, the federal deficit and the threat to cut school breakfast and lunch.

The HNTF is a collaboration of 14 Bucks County organizations. The League of Women Voters convened the group in 2001 in an effort to mobilize action to improve food security. Its members are in frequent contact with Greenwood about ways in which he can use his position on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce to improve nutrition programs.

TANF Extended Through March

The TANF block grant, which provides \$719 million annually to Pennsylvania, was scheduled to expire a year ago. Since then, unable to agree on what a long-term extension of TANF should look like, Congress has repeatedly enacted short extensions. Late in September it did it again, extending TANF through March 2004 with the same requirements as those enacted originally in 1996.

Between now and April, Congress is likely to enact a multi-year extension with stiffer requirements. The President, the House and the Senate Finance Committee are all on record in favor of requiring parents to spend more time in make-work activities. (Current law requires parents with a child under 6 to work or participate in training and make-work activities 20 hours per week; other parents are required to meet a 30 hour-per-week requirement.) And all are on record in support of requiring states to meet higher goals in terms of caseload participation in these programs. The key unknown at this point is whether the full Senate will endorse the Finance Committee's recommendation.

There are several potentially positive developments. The Senate Finance Committee plan does not include the Food Stamp Program in its super-waiver proposal, thus protecting food stamps from wholesale changes at the discretion of the USDA. It also would permit states to count substance abuse counseling or other barrier-removal activities (including education) for up to six months in any 24-month period. Senator Rick Santorum, a member of the Finance Committee, has advanced a proposal to end the drug felony ban except in those states where the legislature affirmatively adopts such a restriction. (Currently the ban is in place unless a state affirmatively opts out of it.) An increase in funding for child care appears to be promising, if for no other reason than to ensure that the children are cared for while their parents meet the heightened hourly requirement demanded by President Bush.

	PA Legislative Session Calendar
<u>October</u> 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29	
<u>November</u> 17, 18, 19, 24, 25	

Did You Know?

The National Low Income Housing Coalition reports that the "Pennsylvania housing wage" for 2003 is \$13.09 an hour, or \$27,227 a year. This is the amount a person working full-time has to earn to afford a two-bedroom unit at a fair market rent while paying no more than 30 percent of that income in rent. While housing costs keep going up every year, wages for many employees are stagnant. In its 2003 report, the Keystone Research Center finds that low-wage Pennsylvania employees earn only \$6.91 an hour, virtually the same (in constant dollars) as in 1979. (See article at page 5.)

Obesity Linked to Food Insecurity

Can we reduce the frequency of obesity by reducing food insecurity? That's the possibility suggested by a Department of Health analysis from the State of Washington. It studied data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System and found a correlation between food insecurity and obesity. Statewide, 18.7 percent of people were obese. But of those who identified themselves as food insecure, the share was larger (24.7 percent). More study is needed to conclude if food insecurity *causes* obesity.

The Washington report refers to previous research that may explain the correlation. "Studies of dieters, prisoners of war, and children with food-restrictive parents indicate that food deprivation can lead to over-consumption of foods restricted previously after the restriction ends." Similarly, "episodic food shortages" can lead to "physiologic adaptation of increased body fat." Thirdly, food insecure households often have "higher consumption of cheaper foods that are higher in fat." Their diets also frequently have fewer vegetables and fruits than recommended. A summary of the report can be found at www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5235a3.htm .

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2. Both pilots caused a nearly 20 percent drop in the number of eligible children who were certified for free meals. In short, increased verification deprived lots of eligible kids of breakfast and lunch.

3. Neither pilot improved the accuracy of certification decisions.

Congress now must decide what to do with this. U.S. Senator Libby Dole (R-NC) has offered the most promising approach. She is the author of a bill (S.1549) that would eliminate the reduced price category by raising the free meal category up to 185 percent of poverty, the same as the WIC Program's income standard. Her proposal, which is supported by Senators Richard Lugar (R-IN) and Tom Daschle (D-SD), would spend additional money feeding children rather than on increased school bureaucracy to separate the applications of needy children (those just above the 130 percent line) from the very needy (those just below that line).

Alternatively, Congress could require schools to verify more applications. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, if Pennsylvania schools were to double the number of applications it verifies, 5,340 *eligible* students would lose free or reduced price meals as a result.

Of course, Senator Dole's approach will only work if the goal is to serve needy children rather than to fill the budget hole created by other policies. Like the early '80s, when budget-cutters decided that calling catsup a vegetable would save a small pile of money, Washington's current budget problems are beginning to put good programs at risk. Readers are encouraged to be vigilant. For updates on this and other issues, visit www.pahunger.org.

Director's Column



Everybody's talking about obesity these days. It's a big problem, to make a bad pun.

Obesity doesn't raise any new moral questions for the anti-hunger movement. We've never been in the business of deciding whether someone is worthy of food. In principle, we simply believe that worthiness doesn't enter into it.

But politically it's another matter. Without political support, over time the nutritional safety net will weaken and begin to tear. And increasingly our political leaders are and will be asking how obesity and hunger can exist in the same household and in the same person. If we don't have a sensible and persuasive response, we can expect public support for our mission to decline.

Several national anti-hunger organizations have issued position papers on this subject, including the Food Research Action Center and the Center on Hunger and Poverty. America's Second Harvest, which is the largest anti-hunger organization, has been quiet so far. But I expect they'll soon speak about this too.

At first glance, talking about hunger *and* obesity is going to make our work more difficult. "Keep it simple" has been the tried and true motto of the anti-hunger movement. "People don't have enough to eat and that's wrong." That message has been effective. And it has attracted powerful allies in agriculture and the food industry.

But now we know we need to emphasize quality, not just quantity, in the food that we distribute. And we are being called upon to explain how the *security* of a household's food supply affects what the members eat and whether it contributes to their good health. Are we ready?

Child Nutrition on Senate Agenda

The Senate Agriculture Committee, chaired by Senator Thad Cochran (R-MS), will begin work later this month to reauthorize five child nutrition programs: WIC, school breakfast and lunch, summer food and the child care food program. Pennsylvania's senators do not serve on that Committee but are expected to weigh in behind the scenes.

Among the proposals under consideration are:

1. Dropping area eligibility to 40 percent so that the Summer Food Service Program may be offered to more communities and the Child and Adult Care Food Program may offer its Tier 1 reimbursement rate to childcare providers in those communities;
2. Simplifying administrative requirements in the Summer Food Service Program; and
3. Providing free school breakfast and lunch to children from families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of poverty.

The Committee is also expected to sift through a raft of proposals related to the foods children eat while in school. Included are a bill to give the USDA authority to regulate competitive foods in school cafeterias and a bill to expand farm-to-cafeteria and fruit and vegetable snack projects. The WIC Program, on the other hand, is expected to receive relatively little attention.

The concern about childhood obesity is expected to drive much of the debate. Already some political commentators have urged that these programs be cut because they make children fat. Countering such views is an August 2003 study from researchers at the University of Tennessee and the University of North Carolina. They found that food insecure girls who participated in the School Breakfast Program, School Lunch Program, and the Food Stamp Program had a 68 percent reduced chance of being overweight as compared with food insecure girls in households that did not participate in these nutrition programs. Boys that participated in these programs had no greater or lesser risk of being overweight. See <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/157/8/780>.

The other major factor that will drive the debate is the federal deficit and the reluctance to spend more on domestic human needs. (See related article on page 1). Readers who are interested in expressing their opinion on these matters are encouraged to visit Hunger Action's website at www.pahunger.org.

Immigrant Children Eligible for FS

Effective October 1, legal immigrant children are eligible for food stamps if they are needy, regardless of their date of entry into the U.S. This reverses a restriction on immigrant eligibility put into law in 1996. In addition, the income and resources of persons who sponsored the immigrant family will no longer be considered.

Research has shown that the incidence of food insecurity and hunger is higher among immigrant households than the general population. This change in law is intended to end that. To ensure that this important message is widely distributed, human service organizations are urged to publicize the new rules, particularly among immigrant families.

The October change in law has no impact on children who entered the U.S. illegally; those children remain ineligible. Nor does it impact the U.S. born children of illegal immigrants; those children have always been eligible. In families where children are U.S. citizens or legal immigrants but the parents are not, the children frequently do not receive food stamps because the parents are afraid to apply on their behalf. Their concern is that by going through the application process, their lack of legal status will be discovered and then disclosed to immigration authorities.

However, this fear is not well-founded. Under federal law, a parent is permitted to submit an application that seeks food stamps just for the children. In such situation, the social security numbers of the children will be required. However, the parent, as a "non-applicant", will not be requested to provide further explanation.

WANTED

We need local partners to work with Hunger Action to host a Community Food Security Workshop in your county. Hunger Action pays for registration and lunch. You develop the agenda and the invitation list. Together we select the speakers. Previous workshops have included child nutrition, finding food, food stamps and PA's food programs. We'll add the latest legislative developments. We have done workshops in almost every corner of the Commonwealth. Be an active partner in making your community more food secure. Call Hunger Action (717-233-6705) to register your interest.

On the Road

Hunger Action has taken its quest to improve School Breakfast Program (SBP) participation and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) participation on the road.

Sue Mitchem of Hunger Action will visit nine school districts around the state that have a large percentage of free and reduced price lunch children and no breakfast program. The districts were identified with the Center's School Breakfast Report Card published in *The Pennsylvania Hunger Advocate* in December 2002.

The districts to be visited include: Rockwood School District (Somerset); Dubois School District (Clearfield); Cranberry Area School District (Venango); Upper Adams School District (Adams); Shamokin School District (Northumberland); North Schuylkill and Pottsville School Districts (Schuylkill); Riverside (Lackawanna); and Sayre Area School District (Bradford).

Mitchem will be visiting school officials, school board members and parents' groups to try to facilitate the establishment of a breakfast program in these districts.

The second part of the outreach effort will include efforts to establish SFSP in some of the following rural counties that currently have few or no SFSP sites: Somerset, Bedford, Fulton, Huntingdon, Mifflin, Juniata, Perry, Clinton, Montour, and Carbon.

Outreach will include calling on school districts that have a large percentage of free and reduced price children, United Ways, and other community agencies that currently offer summer programs for children. It is hoped that these interactions will result in more children receiving summer food next year.

Hunger Action will work in collaboration with Dairy Associations active in Pennsylvania, Project PA's Breakfast Brigade out of Penn State University, and local community partners who are also interested in assuring children are well nourished.

If you live in one of the areas listed above and you would like to become involved with these efforts, please contact Sue at 717-233-6705.

Our Phone Is Ringing



Hunger Action's Food Information Line helped 272 callers in August and 285 callers in September. Remember the number: 1-800-FOOD-997.

Wages Decline in Pennsylvania

After improving steadily from 1995 to 2001, Pennsylvania wages in all but the best jobs were flat in 2002. Moving into 2003, wages began dropping. The median hourly wage during the first six months of 2003 was \$13.09, a drop of 56 cents from the same period in 2002.

Those are the key findings of the Keystone Research Center in *The State of Working Pennsylvania 2003*, an annual publication released Labor Day weekend.

Low-wage workers (those earning more than 10 percent of all Pennsylvania employees but less than 90 percent) earned \$6.91 in 2002, down three cents from 2001. On the other hand, high-wage workers (those earning more than 90 percent of all employees) saw their earnings move up by \$1.24 to \$29.88 an hour.

The report attributes the overall decline in wages to the loss of good-paying jobs. Since March 2001 Pennsylvania has lost nearly 120,000 manufacturing jobs, over half since the end of the recession in November 2001. Meanwhile the job sectors that are growing (health, hospitality, education) include many lower-paying jobs.

In its discussion of solutions, the report focuses on state investment in "public goods" essential to economic development on a region or industry-wide basis. It is critical of the approaches that have dominated in recent years: cutting business taxes and giving targeted tax breaks to selected businesses. It also is critical of recent federal policy in regard to the minimum wage, noting that the gap between the minimum wage and worker productivity is now at its highest level in at least 50 years.

Wages and salaries account for the great majority of family income. When wages fall, as they have these past 18 months, more families are at risk of hunger.

Hunger Action Calls for Inter-Agency Council

Meeting in Harrisburg on September 8th, the Hunger Action Board of Directors renewed its request to the Rendell Administration that it create an inter-agency council on food and nutrition. "Pennsylvania has food programming in six different executive agencies," said Pat Temple-West, director of Nutritional Development Services of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. "Each does its own thing. If these agencies will coordinate their efforts, that will close some of the gaps in anti-hunger efforts."

Dawn Jackson, Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs in the Department of Health, told the Board that she was already working on its suggestion. Recalling that something similar had been in place during the Casey Administration, she asked for additional information about what had and hadn't worked during that time.

The Board emphasized that they want an action-oriented consultative body with a relatively narrow focus. Key members of the council would be senior administrators already engaged in food and nutrition programming. The views of providers and consumers could be elicited through an advisory structure.

State Food Funds Held Up

It's October, getting colder, and the emergency food system in Pennsylvania is stretched thin. So are people who desperately need the food.

Pennsylvania has had a state budget for six months already, yet the process leading to the disbursement of State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) monies has been delayed. Why? In June the PA Department of Agriculture (PDA) asked legislators to allocate an additional \$1 million in SFPP funds to access TEFAP bonus commodities. But legislative progress stalled and PDA's request went nowhere. PDA finally requested county annual operation plans on August 12th. (Historically these requests are sent out earlier.) According to standard procedure, no SFPP money can be sent to counties until these plans are received and reviewed.

Barry Shutt, Director of the Bureau of Food Distribution in PDA, stated, "Seven counties have not submitted plans.... We have contacted each... The other 60 counties have been processed and are in the Comptroller's office or 'in the system'. Some (counties) may have already received first quarter payments with second quarter on the way....We will change the plan submission process so this (hopefully) never happens again."

The delay is "a big frustration for all of us," said Ann McManus, executive director of the Second Harvest Food Bank of Lehigh Valley and Northeastern PA. Kendall Hanna, executive director of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank and the lead agency for Dauphin County, noted: "Fortunately, we are in a financial position where we are able to continue distributing food to our member agencies and thus individuals and families in need." Some counties do not have the funds to operate while they wait. Betsy Hack, Human Service Director for Montour County, reported her pantries were on the verge of closing in August. After Hack complained, PDA found a way to remedy her situation. On September 2nd she received the first quarter's payment and on September 16th the second quarter's.

PARF Exceeds Caseload Target

Thanks to the energetic work of food bankers, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) is going great in Pennsylvania.

The CSFP, which is administered cooperatively by the PA Department of Agriculture (PDA) and the PA Association of Regional Food Banks (PARF), provides a monthly food package mostly to low-income seniors and to children between the ages of five and six. During 2003 it has been available in 22 counties through local food banks.

Pennsylvania began participating in the CSFP in 2002 with a caseload of 5,000 individuals. Thanks in part to the aggressive expansion plans of PDA and PARF, the caseload jumped to 15,120 this year. The problem was that the federal government finished its budget six months late, leaving Pennsylvania less than half the year in which to achieve a three-fold increase in service. Food bankers were up to the challenge, serving 15,456 individuals by the end of September.

For the new fiscal year that began this month, PDA and PARF have requested a caseload of 20,090. All plans for expansion must wait, however, as Congress is again late in passing the federal budget.

USDA Conducts National Study of Food Pantries

Food pantries have become a very important part of America's nutritional safety net. In recognition of this fact, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) commissioned a national survey of food pantries and soup kitchens. Its report, released in July 2003, confirms what many of our readers already know: millions of Americans are at risk of hunger. According to the USDA report, during a typical month during 2001, 4.3 million households (8.0 million adults and 4.5 million children) acquired food from a pantry. Eighty percent were food insecure. Most startling of all, 42 percent experienced hunger despite the help provided. One-quarter of pantry clients reported that an adult in their household did not eat at least one whole day in the last year because of insufficient food or food dollars.

About one-fifth of pantry clients said there were times they were unable to get emergency food when they needed it. The most prevalent problem was a lack of transportation to the pantry location. Other frequently-cited problems were limited pantry hours, pantries running out of food, and restrictions on the number of times a household could visit. Two-thirds of pantries limit visits to once a month or less.

Nearly half (45 percent) reported visiting a food pantry more than once a month, suggesting that their use of pantry food could no longer be considered an emergency. However, of the nearly 90% of pantry households that were eligible for the Food Stamp Program (FSP), only 55% had received food stamps during the year before the survey. Among eligible households not enrolled in the FSP, the most common reason was "uncertainty about eligibility." The report suggests that "expanding awareness of FSP eligibility may be a key to increasing food stamp participation and decreasing hunger among highly disadvantaged households."

While familiarity with the FSP would be a big plus, the report includes evidence that it would address only a part of the problem. Nearly 75 percent of pantry clients said they preferred receiving food from private pantries than the government. Additionally, 36 percent of households cited food stamp problems as their reason for going to the pantry. Unfortunately, the implication for those households that use two or more kinds of private assistance but no public food assistance is that they are more likely to be homeless and to experience graver "material hardships" than other households.

Ultimately, the report concludes that public food assistance programs need to increase their outreach efforts. And because those in need are turning more to private food pantries for help, these private providers are encouraged to become more involved in referrals to public programs. Currently only one in six private food providers offer "FSP- or WIC-related eligibility counseling." That can and should be increased.

The report also includes data on a topic of frequent public debate: the role of faith-based organizations. Two-thirds of emergency food providers are faith-based, serving 60 percent of the needy. Fourteen percent of pantry clients and 34 percent of kitchen clients are sometimes asked to participate in religious activities. Only about one in ten clients expressed discomfort doing so. The report can be found at www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr32/.

WIC ... from page 1

all babies born in the United States. Yet it has funds to provide only a 5-10 minute nutrition lesson during each clinic visit. "Yes, we would love to do more," said Patricia Daniels, Director of the Supplemental Food Programs Division at the USDA. "But WIC is reasonably well-funded now and we do not expect an increase in funding to do the job. What WIC will do is improve the things it can control, which is that 5-10 minutes of parent time that we have for nutrition education."

Sensible as that sounds, it hides a deeper problem: the effects of the funding squeeze WIC has endured over the years. As one member of the Council described it: "The clinics are too small, the staff is too thin, the time with each parent isn't adequate. So the emphasis has become 'get them in and get them out.'" Amid sobering reports of escalating health costs related to America's epidemic of obesity, is it smart to limit WIC's nutritional input to 5-10 minutes a visit? Rather than dreaming up some new scheme to slow the rise in obesity, wouldn't it make sense to invest a little more in the people already doing the job?



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Hunger Action Lists Budget Requests

In every executive agency, staff are busily working on a budget for State FY 2003-04. Hunger Action has listed its rationale for budget recommendations to the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA).

The Center recommends \$17.5 million for the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP). Last March our statewide survey of food pantries showed a 3 percent increase over March 2002 in the number of households served. Since then, the situation has not improved, despite the fact that the economy is growing again, because relatively few jobs are being created. SFPP is needed especially in these difficult economic times. This would be an increase of \$1,050,000, but only 3 percent above the level of two years ago (2001-02), when the Program was funded at \$16,950,000.

The Center recommends \$2 Million in state funds for the Farmer's Market Nutrition Program. By encouraging the consumption of healthy, locally grown produce, the Farmer's Market Nutrition Program is less emergency response and more long-term solution. It includes both grant and formula funding from the USDA as well as a state appropriation. Assuming current levels of operation (\$7.2 million in checks issued), a redemption rate approaching 70 percent and a modest administrative share, the Department will need at least \$5.8 million to keep the Program operating at current levels. The USDA has provided about \$3.8 million annually over the last two years. Thus, the State share should be at least \$2.0 million – or more if the federal share decreases or if the Program is permitted to grow, as we think it should.

To register your opinion with state legislators, go to www.pahunger.org. You can send a fax to your legislator from there.

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