

General Assembly Says “No” to Breakfast

Just before going home for the summer, the General Assembly dropped the lid on plans to expand the School Breakfast Program in PA.

The money for expansion had been allocated. Governor Rendell was eager to move forward. Objections from the School Nutrition Association of PA and the PA School Business Officers had been resolved to the satisfaction of those groups. No legislative leader of either party had voiced public opposition to the breakfast provisions of House Bill 908, which would have required schools with significant numbers of low-income students to begin offering a morning meal.

But at the very end, as a Senate-House Conference Committee ironed out details of the School Code Bill (HB 842), opposition to the School Breakfast expansion surfaced from

House Republicans, who wanted breakfast to remain a local option. In their opposition to a state mandate, they had a crucial ally: the late hour. The final negotiations occurred on Sunday, July 15, when the budget was already more than two weeks late. Completing the School Code Bill was a crucial piece of finishing the budget itself. Rather than wrangle about breakfast and further delay the budget, the conferees agreed to cut breakfast from the bill.

Conferees agreed to include two other aspects of HB 908 in the School Code Bill: more money for schools to cover the cost of school meals and a linkage between the higher

reimbursement rates and local implementation of nutrition guidelines published by the PA Department of Education (PDE). This carried forward into the budget, which includes \$6 million to pay for these changes.

The last minute defeat was a victory for the PA School Board Association and the PA Catholic Conference, both of whom opposed the requirement that low-income schools offer breakfast. It was a disappointment for the Hunger Action Center, the PA Dietetic Association and the PA Parent-Teacher Association, each of whom emphasized the benefits in

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Berry Friesen Announces Resignation

Berry Friesen, who has served as the Hunger Action Center's executive director since 1997, will be leaving his position at the end of the year. Friesen announced his resignation June 18th while meeting with the organization's Board of Directors.

"Hunger Action has been a great fit for me," said Friesen. "The work has been energizing and my colleagues and other advocates in the anti-hunger network have been inspiring. But I want a change and this seems to be the right time to make it, both personally and for the organization."

While specific plans for the next leg of his career are yet to be confirmed, Friesen expects to draw on what he has learned at Hunger Action. "I'm most interested in work at the intersection of faith and politics," he said. "Certainly that's a place where there is lots to do. The only question is whether it pays a living wage!"

Patrick Druhan, Board president and resident of Montgomery County, expressed the reaction of the Board. "Berry has been an incredible leader, an outstanding advocate and a man of persistent and wide-ranging vision. While there is still hunger in Pennsylvania and still work to be done, there

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Passages



Early in my nine-year tenure at the Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center, I received an article by Helen Thomas entitled, "Hunger is an issue for all seasons". Thomas reported on a national poll that overwhelmingly declared that fighting hunger is "the moral and right thing to do".

We have seen much progress during these years - an increase in the minimum wage, a stronger Food Stamp Program, wellness policies in schools, more children in school breakfast and summer meals, improved infrastructure with charitable food, and growth in fresh produce programs. All this is so good; yet there is much still to be done.

I've chosen to retire early - not because I'm tired fighting, but because I want more time with my family. I have three beautiful grandkids to spoil; a just-retired husband to enjoy; a son and wife in Colorado to visit; and a graduate program to pursue. All this feels right to me.

I leave Hunger Action with some sadness. Working with Berry Friesen, executive director and tireless advocate, has been outstanding. Hunger Action staff have been exceptional colleagues. I will also miss my contacts with you, dear readers and advocates. You are the people who have been with us in effecting the changes. Thank you all.

I'll be back as a volunteer. Please make sure we will still be working side-by-side. I'll say it one more time - go to www.pahunger.org to keep abreast on what is next.

~ Sue N. Mitchem

Casey & Specter Team Up

Senators Bob Casey and Arlen Specter have sponsored a bill to make permanent the Summer Food Service Program pilot that operated in Pennsylvania during the summers of 2005 and 2006. Known as S. 1755, the bill would extend the special provisions of the pilot and make them available to every state, not just Pennsylvania. Casey and Specter hope to include the provisions of S. 1755 in the new Farm Bill, which will be taken up by the Senate in September. Joining this effort as co-sponsors are senators Sanders (I-VT), Wyden (D-OR), Kerry (D-MA), Boxer (D-CA), and Brown (D-OH).

Under the provisions of the pilot, open enrollment feeding sites may be operated in geographic areas where 40 percent of the school children qualify for free or reduced price school meals. Under the usual rules, open enrollment sites may only operate in areas where 50 percent of the children are low-income.

In a August 1st meeting with 15 congressional staff, Hunger Action's Sue Mitchem and Tim Whelan of the United Way of the Capital Region described the impact of the pilot in Pennsylvania's rural communities. During the two years the 40 percent rule was in effect, the number of meals served rural children increased by 13 percent, the number of rural feeding sites increased by 47 percent and the number of rural sponsors increased by 24 percent.

Children's Health Insurance Advances

Before leaving Washington in August, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate delivered encouraging news to low-income families by passing legislation to strengthen the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Although the two bills differ in significant ways and will need to be reconciled, the joint action signals Congress will make sure more children have private health insurance. Under the House version, the investment of \$50 billion in new spending would enable six million more American children to be covered. The Senate version would provide \$35 billion in new spending and enable three million additional children to be insured.

President Bush, however, has drawn the line at \$5 billion in new spending and has promised to veto legislation that authorizes more. In the Senate, 68 members (including Specter and Casey) supported a \$35 billion expansion; this would be enough votes to overcome the promised Bush veto. In the House, the margin was much closer and few Republican members (none from PA) supported the \$50 billion expansion. Thus, it appears the Senate version has the best chance of success.

This month, we also say farewell to Meg Bruening. Meg has worked at Hunger Action for nearly three years as the Pennsylvania Nutrition Education Network's nutritionist. In September, she begins working towards a Masters in Public Health at the University of Minnesota.

Best wishes, Meg! You'll be greatly missed!

U.S. House Passes Farm Bill

The opportunity to eat healthily on a tight budget would improve just a bit under Farm Bill legislation approved by the U. S. House of Representatives July 27th.

The House-passed improvements in nutrition would occur primarily through additional spending in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). The standard deduction for small households (3 members or less), unadjusted since 1995, would be indexed and would climb from \$134 to \$145 in 2008. This change would provide a typical family an additional \$5 a month to buy food. The dependent care deduction would no longer be capped, thus allowing working parents to deduct the full amount of child care costs from countable income. The minimum benefit, stuck at \$10 a month for the past 30 years, would increase to \$16 in 2008 and would be adjusted annually thereafter.

House changes also would make it possible for states to streamline their FSP application processes. All tax-deferred retirement accounts would be excluded from consideration. Moreover, states would be allowed to align FSP resource rules with resource rules from TANF-funded programs, some of which are much less complicated to administer.

Outside of the FSP, the House bill also would provide more funding for The Emergency Food Assistance Program, reauthorize the Commodity Supplemental Food Program and permit it to begin serving seniors with incomes up to 185 percent of poverty, reauthorize the Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, and

significantly expand funding for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program in the schools.

Combined, these various improvements, including the changes in the FSP, are expected to cost \$4 billion over five years.

A House majority in support of the package only emerged in the final hours before the decisive floor debate. As recommended by the House Agriculture Committee, the package included the changes noted above but without funding to make them happen. As a result, many House members saw little point in supporting the Committee bill. Late in the process, however, House leadership came up with a plan to provide additional revenue by closing a loophole in the tax code that has enabled multi-national companies to avoid U.S. taxes by establishing off-shore companies. While this caused some members (including all Republican members from Pennsylvania) to vote "no" on final passage, it ensured the strong support of Democratic members from urban districts.

Now, the focus shifts to the U.S. Senate where in September the Agriculture Committee will assemble its proposal. PA Senator Bob Casey will be a key player on the Agriculture Committee when it begins meeting in September. He has pledged to work for a stronger nutrition title that would stop the erosion in buying power within the Food Stamp Program. To contact, Casey, go to www.pahunger.org.

No Breakfast...from Front Page
school performance and weight control that are associated with breakfast.

Sue Mitchem, communications coordinator for Hunger Action, searched for a silver lining. "The breakfast requirement would have affected 350 schools. In mid-July, only 50 or 60 had submitted a waiver request to PDE indicating financial inability to provide breakfast. I'm hoping the other schools, those that were prepared to begin offering breakfast in September, will carry through with their plans. If they do, then the legislative defeat will not result in harm to children."

Mitchem also saw progress in the General Assembly's decision to link meal reimbursement rates with local adoption of PDE's nutrition guidelines. "For the first time, schools that want the higher reimbursement rates will demonstrate to PDE that the overall school food environment, including vended snacks and beverages, is consistent with student health and wellness. For all the money being spent on education, taxpayers should expect nothing less."

Friesen Resigns...from Front Page
is no doubt that Berry has made his mark in improving the food security of our citizens."

During Friesen's tenure, Hunger Action has emphasized policy improvements to improve the food security of low-wage households. The central goals have been to end the erosion in the minimum wage and improve access to the Food Stamp Program. In recent years, the organization also has begun to highlight the links between poor diet and chronic disease and the need to improve access to fruits and vegetables.

Friesen is the fifth executive to have led Hunger Action, an organization that soon will complete its 30th year. Currently it has a staff of eight and an annual budget of \$690,000. Board secretary Janet Ney is leading the search for a new executive director. Interested individuals should contact Ney at jney@caclv.org.



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Governor, General Assembly Take Food from Poor

In the final state budget, Governor Rendell and the General Assembly cut \$1.5 million from food programs. As a result, 37,500 low-income seniors and WIC family members will lose eligibility for \$20 in checks to spend at local farmers' markets. Also, 50,000 fewer food boxes will be distributed by food pantries in the coming year. According to the PA Association of Regional Food Banks, at least 100,000 food insecure Pennsylvanians will be affected.

The cut occurred in a budget flush with a \$650 million surplus, prompting some members of the General Assembly to express embarrassment about the decision. Nevertheless, Governor Rendell requested a cut in his February budget request and Assembly leaders, eager to demonstrate their ability to hold the line on spending, decided to give him what he asked.

Joyce Rothermel, president and CEO of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, expressed shock at the reduction in the State Food Purchase Program. "Food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens are now confronted with a triple whammy," said Rothermel, referring to rising food costs, rising need and dropping state support. "Yet state spending will increase by 4.4 percent this year. Why was it necessary to cut funds to Pennsylvania's families struggling to put basic food on their tables?"

The two programs are administered by the PA Department of Agriculture. Officials there reported many calls from legislators questioning why so few seniors and WIC families are being served this year by the FMNP. Of course, it was their votes that caused the cuts to occur.

Food banks will attempt to fill the gap with private food donations. Pantries not served by a regional food bank will see their inventories drop and will thus serve fewer families, offer smaller packages, and/or provide lower quality food. Countering these negative factors will be the increase in the minimum wage, which as of July 1st has been adjusted to \$7.15 an hour for most employers and \$6.65 an hour for employers of 10 or fewer workers.

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