

Food Stamp Changes On the Horizon

This October, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) will be implementing far more changes to the Food Stamp Program than the typical annual adjustments to income guidelines and maximum benefit allowances. Advocates have been making a case for these changes for quite some time and, with the passage of the 2008 Farm Bill, they will finally see them enacted.

What are these changes? And what impact will they have for Food Stamp Households in Pennsylvania?

The **minimum standard deduction** for households with one to three members will be increased \$10 to \$144 and indexed for inflation in following years. The average working family will see an additional \$5 a month in benefits.

The **dependent care deduction** will no longer be capped. Families will be

able to deduct the full amount of child care paid. This will provide an average of an additional \$40/month for working families.

The **minimum benefit** for a 1 or 2 member household will increase to 8 percent of the thrifty food plan for a 1 member household. This will likely raise it from \$10 to \$14 and then indexed for inflation in later years.

Combat pay will be excluded from countable income of those households that have a service member(s) deployed to a combat zone.

Asset limits will be indexed for inflation (rounded down to the nearest \$250); however, the \$3,000

limit for disabled and elderly households is not anticipated to jump until 2012. (Currently, DPW is working on a TANF-funded service that will eliminate the resource test for many Food Stamp households. Look to future issues of The PA Hunger Advocate for more details.)

Increasing or eliminating the asset limit allows households whose income qualifies them to participate in the Food Stamp Program but who were ineligible in the past simply because their resources were too high. Households will no longer be required to nearly deplete their safety nets in order to receive help.

Laura Tobin

ltobin@pahunger.org

IN THIS ISSUE

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State Budget	2
Child Nutrition	3
Column	3
Senator Casey	4

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More Kids Went Without Last Summer

In July, the Food Research and Action Center released its *Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation 2008*, an annual report that looks at national participation in the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) administered during the summer. At the root of the report is the vital role these programs play in filling the "nutritional gap" left by summer break for children that would normally receive free or reduced-price school meals.

Unfortunately, participation in these Summer Nutrition programs is very low. In July 2007, the national average was 2.85 million served each day compared to 3.2 million in 2002. While this figure may still appear impressive, it represents only 17.5 percent of the number of children that participate in the school year lunch program (down from 2006). This means that over 82 children out of 100 who receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year are not accessing free lunches during the summer.

The need for Summer Nutrition programs is on the rise. According to data provided by the PA Department of Education, the percentage of free and reduced-price eligible children was up in 2007. Unfortunately, the percentage of kids being served in the summer was down despite this increase in

Continued on p. 2...Summer

State Budget Lowlights

On July 7, the Governor signed the Commonwealth's budget for the July 1, 2008 – June 30, 2009 fiscal year. For sure, there is much to applaud in the new spending plan – significant, continued investment in children's education, funding to address a crumbling infrastructure and resourcing an energy independence initiative, to name a few. Unfortunately, the strides made in these important areas did not carry over to any advances in food and nutrition programs.

Hunger Action joined forces with the Pennsylvania Association of Regional Food Banks and Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania to create a statewide coalition that could mobilize significant grassroots support on behalf of hungry residents of the state. Indeed, well over 4,000 letters were generated in support of the vital programs outlined below. During Capitol Hill visits over an entire week in early June, these pleas for legislative action to help the most vulnerable were hand-delivered to the Representatives and Senators to whom they were addressed. Alas, the aggressive effort was for naught as the following table illustrates:

<u>PROGRAM</u>	<u>FUNDING REQUESTED</u>	<u>2008-2009 BUDGET</u>
State Food Purchase Program	\$22,000,000	\$18,000,000
Farmer's Market Nutrition Program	\$3,000,000	\$2,226,000
PA Agricultural Surplus Program	\$750,000	\$0
RX for PA School Food Services	\$6,043,000	\$4,000,000

It will never be known if these results were the victim of concerns over anticipated revenues in the upcoming year (eroding tax receipts), competing demands that were deemed more important, or just plain indifference. Whatever the case, Hunger Action and its allies will renew the fight for a just budget for those on whose behalf we advocate. Beginning in September, planning for the next state budget cycle will commence. Stay tuned.

Joe Quattrocchi
jqquattrocchi@pahunger.org

Don't Worry! Your Resource Guide didn't fall out!

In order to provide you with the most up-to-date information for all food and nutrition programs, we are changing the publication date to October.

Look for it in our next issue!

Summer...from front page

need. For the first time in 10 years, PA's ranking in the ratio of children participating in Summer Nutrition programs to those participating in school-year NSLP fell below the top ten in the nation. Traditionally, PA has been ranked 7 or 8; however, in 2007, this ranking fell to 11. And while PA's ratio of 25.8 remains higher than the national average, this fall represents a drop of 7.6 percent in participation from 2006.

Part of this decline can be attributed to the loss in 2007 of the PA Rural Area Eligibility Pilot, which had lowered site eligibility to 40 percent in rural areas. As reported in the previous edition of *The PA Hunger Advocate*, a study of the pilot revealed an increase in participation during the years of the pilot, 2005 and 2006. PA Rep. Platts (R-19) has introduced H.R. 2968 (the Summer Food Service Rural Expansion Act), which is calling to reinstate these guidelines in PA and apply them to all rural areas across the country.

If used to their full potential, the Rural Expansion Act in addition to the Simplified Summer Food Program (which reduces paperwork and offers full reimbursement for all meals) will help increase participation. However, the Child Nutrition Reauthorization in 2009 will be the real opportunity to significantly affect change in these programs. Reimbursement rates must be raised to meet rising food costs. Start-up costs are another factor that holds back potential sponsors from participating in the program. Grants could be provided to defer some if not all of these initial costs. School districts and local community groups must also be brought in as potential sponsors or partners in beginning, growing, and promoting summer feeding sites.

Laura Tobin
ltobin@pahunger.org

Listen Up!

The reauthorization of federally-funded programs that make available school meals to low-income children for free or at reduced prices, as well as meals and snacks during out of school time, has begun. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has scheduled a series of listening sessions across the country to solicit input on the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

The listening sessions are advance work done by the USDA to facilitate the reauthorization process to commence with the new Congress which convenes in January. Their task will be the 2009 Reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Programs and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for WIC. The 2004 reauthorization is set to expire on September 30, 2009.

A listening session was held in Baltimore on August 6, with approximately 150 attendees representing anti-hunger advocates, emergency food assistance providers, nutritionists and dieticians, as well as trade associations for produce growers, the beef industry, and others. Pre-registrants for the session were given a maximum of only four minutes each to provide testimony if so desired. Approximately 45 people, of which 13 were from PA, took the opportunity.

Hunger Action's testimony was very broad, touching on several key policy recommendations pertaining primarily to:

- greater access to these programs by revising or eliminating current restrictions to extend eligibility;
- enhancing the nutritional value of food served to children; and
- easing the burdensome administrative paperwork and reporting requirements placed on schools, other meal providers, and food program sponsors.

While others' testimony was typically more focused, given the range of interests of attendees, the above points also became main themes when taking the testimony provided as a whole.

The listening sessions are accompanied by the opportunity to provide more extensive written comments through October 15. After this, state coalitions will begin in earnest to formulate priorities and strategies in anticipation of the legislative work to begin in January. Hunger Action will be very engaged in this process. Look to future issues of The PA Hunger Advocate and postings on our website www.pahunger.org for updates and alerts.

Joe Quattrocchi
jquattrocchi@pahunger.org



Director's Report

The talk swirling around about the state of the economy and what to do about it, how we need to invest in energy alternatives, and the call to infuse significant resources to rebuild a crumbling infrastructure all point to the same thing – government spending of our collective resources to ensure a safe and secure future.

I have absolutely no quarrel with these priorities; obviously we need to address the major problems that confront us. But why isn't it also obvious that we need to make similar investments in our children? After all, isn't the future really about them?

The child nutrition reauthorization process now in its beginning stages is a prime opportunity to do just that. It offers the occasion to make sure all kids are properly fed, so that they are ready and able to learn and to grow into tomorrow's work force. But particularly for the nation's low income children, improvements to the feeding programs up for reauthorization would represent a strengthening of the nutritional safety net that ensures none of them is left behind.

The most recent government estimates indicate 13 million children in low-income homes suffer from food insecurity and are at risk of hunger. The lifeline for the vast majority of them is the National School Lunch Program, to a lesser extent the School Breakfast Program and, unfortunately, to a minimal degree the Summer Food Service Program. The fact is more children can and must be enrolled in these programs. Parents must be reached with information about the role of nutrition to the age-appropriate development of their children and the programs available to help them help their children. Impediments of insufficient meal reimbursement and taxing paperwork placed before schools and other meal providers must be eased if not eliminated.

We must also make these changes part of our nation's priorities. For our kids and for our future.



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Our Man in Washington

Again Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) is front and center with two pieces of legislation important to anti-hunger advocates and advocates for children.

S. 3421 is a response to the high cost of gasoline and the effect it is having on volunteers who drive to perform their work. Perhaps nowhere is this more problematic than for Meals on Wheels programs. Many volunteers (especially in rural areas) can no longer afford to drive their cars to deliver meals to folks that depend on this service. The current charitable reimbursement rate (which has remained unchanged since 1997) is 14 cents per mile. As a result, people have had to stop or significantly curtail their volunteering, which leaves others in jeopardy of not receiving meals. The legislation would set the charitable mileage rate equivalent to the business rate which is currently 58.5 cents per mile. Last April, Rep. Platts (R-19) introduced a similar bill, H.R. 2020, in the House.

S. 3277 (the Children's Budget Act) is intended to bring unprecedented focus on how, and how much, the federal budget invests in children. It is hoped that a clearer picture of spending on children's programs that would emerge would drive greater investments in health, social and educational priorities in the future. The legislation would require future Presidents submit "detailed analysis" to Congress regarding the degree to which "gross and net appropriations or obligational authority and outlays are directed to children". At issue with this approach is linking children's spending to a share of the domestic budget may open the door to pitting it against other major expenditures – Social Security and Medicare – by those who would use it as the opportunity to slash domestic spending overall. Among the alternatives suggested to avert this is to link the analysis to the share of federal spending per child or to a share of the Gross Domestic Product. However the matter is resolved we should be proud that Senator Casey is again at the forefront of lawmaking intended to serve the best interests of children.

Joe Quattrocchi
jqquattrocchi@pahunger.org

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