



May 21, 2007

**Please help Washington's hungry families.
End the erosion of Food Stamp Benefits!**

Dear Member of the Washington Congressional Delegation:

This year's Farm Bill, now being crafted in Congress, will reauthorize two programs that are critically important in the fight against hunger in Washington: the Food Stamp Program and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). While we recognize the budget constraints under which Congress is operating, we urge you to work with the Agriculture Committee to **secure increased funding** for these programs so we can continue to reduce hunger in Washington.

For 30 years, the Food Stamp Program has been America's first line of defense against hunger. More than 80 percent of food stamp benefits go to families with children; most of the rest go to households with seniors or people with disabilities. By enabling these households to purchase more food, the Food Stamp Program also provides an economic boost to the communities — rural, urban, and suburban alike — in which these people live.

In Washington State, where more than **535,768** people rely on food stamps each month to avoid going hungry, the program generates roughly \$1.1 billion in new economic activity each year. The majority of families with children that receive food stamps are working.

Largely because of the Food Stamp Program, we have nearly eliminated severe hunger and diseases related to malnutrition in this country. Yet, "food insecurity" — the lack of adequate nutrition for an active, healthy life — remains a serious problem, both nationally and in Washington. About **275,000** Washington households struggle to put food on the table. Many of these people are not eligible for food stamps, despite their low incomes, because of restrictive program rules; many others receive food stamps but the benefits are too small to enable the family to meet its food needs.

Congress should make the Food Stamp Program more effective in fighting food insecurity in this year's Farm Bill by making these key improvements:

- **Stopping the erosion of benefits.** The average food stamp benefit in Washington is only *\$1.03 per person per meal*. Moreover, the purchasing power of most households' food stamp benefits is shrinking each year as a result of large cuts Congress made in the program in 1996. In 2008, needy Washingtonians will receive \$32 million less in food stamp benefits than they would have received without these cuts — that's \$37 per month for a typical Washington working poor family. Because food stamp benefits are small and steadily shrinking, many households' food stamps run out before the end of the month, which can make it harder for them to succeed at school and work. **Congress should improve food stamp benefits; at a minimum, Congress must prevent further erosion in food stamp benefits.** It can accomplish this by improving the program's standard deduction and letting families deduct more of their child care costs.
- **Making more needy households eligible for food stamps.** Several categories of households are ineligible for food stamps even though they need them just as much as families that *do* receive food stamps. For example, households generally are ineligible for food stamps if

they have more than \$2,000 in assets. This limit, which has remained frozen for *more than two decades*, prevents families that have built modest savings for retirement from obtaining needed food assistance, no matter how low their incomes are. Similarly, many legal immigrants are ineligible for food stamps regardless of their incomes, and poor childless unemployed adults face a three-month time limit on food stamps even if they are unable to find work. Such people should be able to get a helping hand to get them through hard times. **Congress should raise the food stamp asset limit, make adult legal immigrants eligible for food stamps on the same basis as citizens, and eliminate the time limit on food stamps for childless unemployed adults.**

- **Helping working families with child care expenses.** Many low-income families must pay a significant share of their income for the child care that enables them to go to work, and this can place a strain on their ability to afford food. Currently the amount of child care costs that are taken into account when food stamp benefits are calculated is capped. President Bush has proposed allowing households to deduct the full amount of child care costs they incur. **Congress should adopt President Bush's proposal to uncap the dependent care deduction.**
- **Improving program participation.** Too many eligible households, especially working-poor families, legal immigrant families, and seniors, are missing out on food stamps. In Washington, 65 percent of those eligible get help, leaving an estimated 230,000 eligible individuals in Washington to miss out on benefits. **Congress should streamline and simplify program rules to ease barriers that are impeding eligible households from participating in food stamps.**
- **Maintaining state flexibility.** Washington is a prime example of how states can use flexibility to meet their particular needs. Washington has streamlined service to needy Washingtonians, primarily by adopting of "categorical eligibility," which allows a state to qualify certain households for food stamps if they receive help with federal TANF funds. In his proposed budget, however, President Bush has suggested eliminating this state option. The GAO estimates that *11,000 would lose their food stamp eligibility* if that happens. Most of those affected would be low-income working families with children. **Congress should maintain the categorical eligibility option.**

The Farm Bill also offers an opportunity to strengthen the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides community food banks with much-needed commodities. Unfortunately, TEFAP commodities received by food banks in Washington have declined each of the past two years, even as the demand for emergency food assistance continues to grow. **Congress should increase TEFAP funding so the food banks in Washington can meet the needs of the 275,000 households in State that live with the threat of hunger.**

We urge you to work together and recommend to the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Agriculture Committee to include these improvements in the 2007 Farm Bill.

As Americans, we are fortunate to live in a nation with an abundant food supply. Food stamps and TEFAP help connect that food supply with vulnerable people such as children, people with disabilities, and seniors. In the upcoming Farm Bill, we strongly urge Congress to strengthen those two crucial programs and thereby move us closer to a hunger-free America.

Thank you for your continued support of these programs. Washingtonians are counting on you to help ensure our most vulnerable citizens are not going hungry.

Sincerely,

Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition, and:

Organizations:

Bellingham Food Bank
Blue Mountain Action Council, Walla Walla
Bonney Lake Food Bank, Pierce County
Children's Alliance
Des Moines Area Food Bank, King County
Emergency Food Network, Pierce County
Families United Network
Farestart, Seattle
FISH Food Banks of Pierce County
Food Connection, Tacoma
Food Lifeline, Western Washington
Lifelong AIDS Alliance, King County
Lutheran Public Policy Office of Washington State
Minority Executive Directors Coalition, King County
Northwest Harvest, Washington State
Northwest Regional Council, Bellingham
North Sound Dietetic Association
Positive Women's Network, Everett
Rotary First Harvest, Seattle
Seattle Food Committee
Seattle Human Services Coalition
Skagit County Community Action Agency
Simon's Net, Yakima
Solid Ground, Seattle
South King County Food Coalition
Statewide Poverty Action Network
Thurston County Food Bank
University District Food Bank
Volunteers of America of Western Washington
Wapato Food Bank
Washington Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest
Washington Association of Local WIC Agencies
Washington Food Coalition
Washington State Food and Nutrition Council
Washington School Nutrition Association
Washington State Catholic Conference
Washington State Dietetic Association
Whitman County Council on Aging and Human Services
Yakima Food Bank

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