

October 15, 2007

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
The Honorable Charles E. Schumer

Dear Senators Clinton/Schumer:

The 2007 Farm Bill will reauthorize the Food Stamp Program, the most important program for reducing hunger in New York. We urge you to work with the Senate leadership and Agriculture Committee members to strengthen the Food Stamp Program, which has been documented by the GAO as having a remarkable accuracy rate.

For 30 years, the Food Stamp Program has been America's first line of defense against hunger. Food stamps serve over 25 million Americans, including about 13 million children (one in five), making it the nation's largest anti-hunger program. Nationally and in our state, it is the single biggest nutrition program for low-income children; helping to feed 724,000 of New York's low-income children. The program also serves almost 300,000 elderly New Yorkers.

In total, about 1.8 million New Yorkers receive food stamp benefits each month averaging \$1.16 per person per meal. This generates roughly \$4.2 billion in economic activity in rural, urban and suburban communities each year. Many of those who receive food stamps are working and need this help to provide food for their families.

Due in large part to the Food Stamp Program, severe hunger and diseases related to malnutrition are rare in the United States. Yet, too many New York households struggle to put enough food on the table and more than two million turn to emergency feeding programs each year. Many are not eligible for food stamps despite their low incomes due to restrictive program rules. Others do receive food stamps but the benefits are too small to allow them to meet all their food needs. Even more eligible New York households miss out on an estimated \$1.5 billion in food stamp benefits because they do not participate in this nutrition assistance program.

The Senate must take the opportunity in crafting the 2007 Farm Bill to strengthen the Food Stamp Program. Limited resources in the nutrition title should be used to strengthen existing nutrition programs. Programs to expand the consumption of fruits and vegetables should be included in other titles where the focus is on commodities, not the nutrition title, which is rightly focused on reducing hunger.

How the Senate's Farm Bill Can Help Vulnerable New Yorkers

1. Stop cuts in purchasing power: The food stamp "standard deduction" has been frozen since 1995, which has resulted in lower benefits for more than 1.2 million New Yorkers. If Congress fails to act by next year, food stamp benefits for a typical working parent with two children in New York will have dropped in real terms by about \$24 a month as compared with 1995. *The House bill prevents further erosion of food purchasing power and restores part of what has been lost in the last decade. Specifically, it would restore \$5-11 in monthly benefits (\$168 million statewide) that low-income New Yorkers would otherwise lose over the next five years.*

☉ Senate Action: *We ask the Senate to raise the standard deduction to \$188, resulting in a typical working family receiving an additional \$24 a month in benefits.*

2. Increase minimum benefits for older adults and people with disabilities:

The monthly minimum benefit of \$10 has not been raised in 30 years; had it been indexed to inflation it would buy almost three times as much food as it does today. *The House bill sets the minimum benefit at 10% of the maximum benefit for a household of one (\$16) and indexes it to inflation to keep up with rising food prices. This \$6 monthly increase to the 40,000 New Yorkers who currently receive the minimum monthly allotments, overwhelmingly people who are elderly or have a disability, provides an additional \$15 million in benefits statewide over five years.*

☉ Senate Action: *We ask the Senate to set the minimum benefit at 20 percent of the maximum benefit (\$30 instead of \$16), and index it for inflation each year so that this particular problem need not be revisited.*

3. Ensure that high child care costs don't eat away at a family's food budget: Child care is the 3rd largest expense for low to middle income families after housing and food. The US Census Bureau reports that one-quarter of families below poverty level with employed mothers pay 25% of their income for child care. As child care costs for low-wage workers have escalated, the amount families can deduct in calculating their food stamp benefits has remained capped since 1993 at \$200 per month for infants under 2 years and \$175 per month for older children. *The House bill lifts the cap so working families can deduct the full amount of child care costs they incur in order to work. This will increase benefits by a total of \$17 million over five years for 14,260 working families in New York.*

☉ Senate Action: *We recommend that the Senate go one step further and give states the option of treating child care costs as either an income exclusion or an income deduction. Treating child care costs as an income exclusion will allow more working families in NYS to participate in the Food Stamp Program.*

4. Remove the savings disincentive: The food stamp resource limits (\$3,000 for older/disabled households; \$2,000 for everyone else) have not been raised in 20 years and are so low that households are forced to impoverish themselves before they can apply. *The House bill exempts retirement and educational accounts as countable resources and begins indexing the resource limit to inflation.*

☉ Senate Action: *We agree that the resource limits are too low and support the House provision.*

5. End time limits for unemployed childless adults: Food stamp employment and training requirements have long required employable adults to participate in work activities as a condition of receiving food stamp benefits. In 1996, Congress imposed time limits for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) who fail to meet an additional and more rigid set of employment criteria. Unfortunately, these "ABAWD rules" have turned out to be hugely burdensome to both local districts and recipient households, because of onerous tracking and reporting requirements. Additionally, the requirements have done nothing to address local problems of unemployment and lack of job opportunities.

☉ Senate Action: *In order to simplify program administration and reduce unnecessary barriers to participation, we ask the Senate to eliminate the ABAWD rules.*

6. Rename the Food Stamp Program: In an effort to keep renaming simple and almost invisible to participants, still reflect the change from paper coupons, lower stigma to participation, and be true to the program's overall goal, we suggest that the Food Stamp Program be given a new name that is in keeping with the names suggested by USDA and that maintains the "FSP" acronym.

📌 Senate Action: *We ask the Senate to put forth a new name for the Food Stamp Program that is in keeping with the names suggested by USDA and that maintains the “FSP” acronym.*

It is unacceptable to allow our most vulnerable community members to go without adequate food. We urge you to communicate to Senate leadership and Agriculture Committee members that the Senate Farm Bill must contain no less than the \$4 billion provided by the House to strengthen the Food Stamp Program. We also ask you to guard against any amendments or efforts that cut back on any food stamp benefits that are currently available. Many more improvements can be made if additional resources are found. The Senate should build on the success of this vital nutrition assistance program to improve benefit levels and extend eligibility to more vulnerable households.

Sincerely,

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