

# **THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM IN CALIFORNIA**

The Food Stamp Program has made severe hunger rare in America. In the late 1960s, medical research exposed the fact that American children suffered and died from diseases related to severe malnutrition that usually are thought of as occurring only in third-world countries. In 1979, after the Food Stamp Program became available nation-wide, physicians discovered that this severe malnutrition had become rare, a result they attributed to the Food Stamp Program. The Food Stamp Program is the largest anti-hunger program in California.

## **Food stamps help vulnerable State residents and the economy**

- 1,990,919 Californians use food stamps to buy food every month. That amounts to 5.5 percent of the people in California.
- California food stamp households receive, on average, \$1.08 per person per meal in food stamp benefits. This modest amount is crucial to financially pressed families.
- The Food Stamp Program pumped 2,312,644,863 into the California economy last year, benefiting farmers, grocers, and small businesses throughout the state.
- Nationally, about 80 percent of food stamp benefits go to households with children, many of them in working families. Most of the rest go to households containing elderly people or people with disabilities.

## **Food stamps help people through hard times**

- During the recent recession and subsequent weak recovery, Food Stamp Program participation in California increased. In 2000, an average of 1,830,677 Californians received food stamps each month. That number rose steadily to 1,990,919 in 2005, an increase of 8.8 percent.
- Using the flexibility provided in the Food Stamp Act, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was able to quickly issue \$907 million in disaster food stamps to 2.2 million households that survived Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma last year.

## **Unmet need remains**

- Still, about 38 million Americans, including nearly one in five American children, have difficulty affording food. An estimated 1,495,845 households in California live with hunger or the threat of hunger, according to USDA. That includes low-income working families and senior citizens living on fixed incomes.
- Nationally, only 60 percent of those eligible for food stamps receive them. In California, the participation rate is estimated to be 46 percent.
- Increasing the share of eligible households that participate in the Food Stamp Program by just five percentage points, California would provide food stamps to an additional 186,000 low-income Californians, bring \$130,600,000 into our local economy, and result in \$240,300,000 in new economic activity.

## Recommendations to Congress for the Food Stamp Program in the Upcoming Farm Bill

Our top priority in the 2007 Farm Bill reauthorization is a strong nutrition title that reauthorizes and improves the Food Stamp Program, the nation's first defense against hunger. The Food Stamp Program's basic entitlement structure must be maintained while greater resources are provided to the program to more effectively fight hunger in our communities. Areas for program investment include:

- **Improving the Adequacy of Benefits.** Neither the average food stamp benefit level of \$1 per person per meal, nor the \$10 monthly minimum benefit is sufficient to help families purchase an adequate diet. This dietary shortfall negatively impacts recipients' health and impedes the ability of children to learn and adults to work.
- **Expanding Eligibility for the Program.** Too many people in our communities are in need of food stamps but cannot get them. Those people in need of food but excluded from the Food Stamp Program include working poor families with savings slightly above outdated resource limits, many legal immigrants, and numerous indigent jobless people seeking employment.
- **Reduce Access Barriers.** While the 2002 farm bill helped to make it easier for low-income people to participate in the Food Stamp program, many *eligible* people are missing out on benefits that could help address their food needs. The application process remains too difficult for some. More than one-half of eligible working families and 70 percent of eligible elderly individuals do not participate in the program. Congress must build upon its efforts in the 2002 Farm Bill to reduce unnecessary paperwork, streamline eligibility rules where appropriate and invest in outreach and enrollment efforts.
- **Keep the Focus of the Nutrition Title on Addressing Hunger in America.** The USDA and Census Bureau find that more than 35 million people in the United States live in households that face a constant struggle against hunger. It is essential that the 2007 Farm Bill address the pressing problem of hunger amidst plenty by strengthening the nation's Food Stamp Program. While there are a number of proposals with the stated goal of healthy eating or fruit and vegetable consumption, those ideas should be considered in other parts of the Farm Bill.

In addition to the necessary improvements to the Food Stamp Program, the 2007 Farm Bill also will provide Congress with an opportunity to assist the front-line agencies that deal with the problem of hunger every day. The nation's food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens are stretched to serve more and more people whose food stamps have run out mid-month or whose income and resources put them just above the food stamp eligibility threshold.

We urge the 2007 Farm Bill and FY 2008 Budget to invest significant new resources to make food stamp benefit allotments sufficient to real world needs, to open eligibility to more vulnerable populations, to connect more eligible people with benefits, and to adequately support emergency feeding programs.