



# Wisconsin Council of Churches

...working together for the unity of the Church and the healing of the world.

August 4, 2005

Mr. Mike Johanns, Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Johanns:

On behalf of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, I am writing to express our strong support for the food and nutrition programs administered by the USDA. For the sake of all those who face food insecurity – low-income families and individuals, the unemployed, children, students, the homeless, the elderly, the disabled – we urge that these programs must be preserved and strengthened.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches is an ecumenical association of 22 Wisconsin judicatories of 12 denominations. Among our member churches are many congregations and individuals who are working to prevent hunger in our state, by providing emergency food services and advocating policies to alleviate food insecurity. Their commitment grows out of their faith that calls them to feed the hungry and defend the poor, the vulnerable, the stranger – responding to Jesus' words, "As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me." (Matthew 25:40).

Through food pantries, meal programs, and food banks, congregations and community organizations are doing their part to help hungry people feed themselves and their families. But they cannot do it alone. As a nation, we must also act through government assistance programs to help our neighbors in need most efficiently and effectively.

We are concerned for all the USDA's hunger and nutrition programs, but the Council's policy work on hunger and nutrition is currently focused on the School Breakfast Program and the Food Stamp Program. We have supported an increase in Wisconsin's contribution to the cost of providing School Breakfasts in an effort to expand the number of Wisconsin schools participating in the program and to increase the number of low-income students benefiting from it. We strongly support the School Breakfast program as a way of both enhancing student performance and meeting schoolchildren's nutritional needs.

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The Food Stamp Program may be our most important means of preventing hunger in the United States. According to Rebecca Blank, Dean of the Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan, "Evidence of severe malnutrition-related health problems has almost disappeared in this country. The primary reason is Food Stamps." Yet, in the current debates about the federal budget, some have proposed drastically cutting the Food Stamp Program – in spite of the fact that the Food Stamp program has already suffered major cuts over the past decade and Food Stamp error rates are at an all-time low. **We urge you to advocate with policymakers on behalf of protecting the Food Stamp program from excessive budget cuts.**

Some have also proposed changing the structure of Food Stamps from an entitlement program to a block grant. It is essential to protecting American households from hunger and poverty, especially in times of economic downturns, that the federal guarantee of benefits to eligible households be maintained. The current waiver authority and policy options provide states with necessary flexibility while preserving the federal guarantee of benefits. **We urge you to oppose efforts to transform Food Stamps into a block grant program or to give states broader waiver authority.**

Although Food Stamp benefits are effectively targeted to the neediest participants and the program has been successful in reducing severe malnutrition, many families that receive nutrition assistance still struggle to make ends meet in the face of rising costs of housing, groceries, childcare, health care, transportation, and so on. Moreover, many genuinely needy people – particularly unemployed, childless adults and legal immigrants – are denied Food Stamp benefits. **We urge an increase in the minimum benefit level, and restoration of full eligibility and access to Food Stamps for legal immigrants and Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependent Children.**

Administering the Food Stamp program becomes more and more difficult for states as caseloads increase and resources for administering the Food Stamp program decrease. Although technological improvements, such as internet, can help, there are times when participants need individualized attention. **We urge that measures be taken to ensure that applicants have access to local offices while keeping caseloads manageable.**

As the Wisconsin Council of Churches' Economic Justice Statement observes, "In God's Creation we find abundant resources to feed, house and clothe ourselves. God continues to bless us with these resources. Our concern as the Council of Churches is that without proper management, those resources are being depleted and are not reaching those who need them the most." School Breakfast, Food Stamps, and the USDA's other food and nutrition programs are crucial instruments by which we *can* manage our abundant resources for the good of all, and we fervently hope that the 2007 Farm Bill will preserve and strengthen them.

We deeply appreciate this opportunity to express our concerns. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Peter W. Bakken  
Coordinator for Public Policy