

Testimony before the Farm Bill HealthierUS Nutrition Forum

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October 6, 2005

Overview:

Food Stamps is an incredibly valuable resource for the nutrition of low-income families and individuals.

In Monterey County there are over 20,000 individuals receiving Food Stamps with an annual allotment of approximately \$16 million.

We are aware of four phenomena that we would like to see addressed: 1) Program Simplification; 2) Increased Accuracy; 3) Nutritional Promotion; and 4) Farmworker Outreach and Restoration of Benefits to Legal Immigrants

Discussion

1. Program Simplification Through simplifying eligibility processes we believe that program integrity, accuracy and outreach can be promoted. No one likes the current complexity of welfare programs -- not the customers we serve nor the staff who often struggle to deliver the kind of quality services they expect of themselves. We participated with FNS in a forum with interested Counties and State representatives to address simplification ideas and would like to forward one of the ideas that came from that forum.

The proposal was dubbed "simply restarts" during the forum. Under this proposal counties would be allowed to rescind discontinuances if customers come back for assistance within their annual certification period. This rescind could be accomplished with submission of a new QR-7 report to update critical information. The simple restart would save staff the time of evaluating a new application for the nearly 7,000 customers who leave reapply within their 12 month certification period every month -- over 50% of our intake caseload. It would save customers the grief of relocating a large number of documents that we need to include in a new application packet. And, it would be an incredible service to the many seasonal workers of Monterey County whose income fluctuates with the growing and tourist seasons.

2. Increased Accuracy: Elimination of the requirement that applications not be denied until 30 days after the date an application is initiated. This is an issue that is just now becoming understood by California counties. California requires applications to be processed within 30 days in order to assure timely service. As a result, when the 30th day falls on a weekend or holiday, a denial is issued before the 30th day. This results in a negative error which drives up California's error

rate as a result of our commitment to customer service. Changing the law to allow states to deny applications before the 30th day, but no earlier than 25 days, with at least one reminder given within 15 days to customers that they still have paperwork to complete makes sense. Particularly if there is timely notification of any action which includes notice that denial could be rescinded if necessary documents are received prior to the 30th day. Changing the law to allow this improves accuracy and efficiency without harming customers

3. Farmworker Outreach and Restoration of Benefits to Legal Immigrants: Our nation's farmworkers keep our nation strong and healthy. I often muse that farmwork is the most important national security industry - without food, there is no security. Farmworkers, however, are often recent immigrants and are among the lowest income workers in the country. Outreach to farmworkers to assure they have adequate access to the very commodity that they produce is essential. I know much has been pursued in the last couple of years around marketing Food Stamps to Spanish-speaking communities to achieve more success in outreach, yet many still do not avail themselves of Food Stamps. This is in part due to the stigmatization of the program that occurred with the prohibition of aid to legal immigrants. While many benefits have been restored, the requirement that non-disabled, adult legal permanent residents who have for less than five years be disqualified from the program leaves many of our potential customers who are farmworkers confused. Restoring benefits to legal immigrants recognizes the important role immigrants play in making sure our nation is healthy and fed and reduces the immense strain on our public health system caused by hunger and food insecurity.

4. Nutritional Promotion: Food Stamps is first and foremost a nutrition program. Many of the foods that customers purchase are heavily marketed and have little to no nutritional value. Nationwide we are experiencing an epidemic of obesity and growing rates of juvenile diabetes. These public health problems have a profound deleterious impact on those individuals impacted, particularly children. They cost our health care system dearly, and they can result in serious problems for family self-sufficiency should individual health problems become acute. We have engaged in a national dialogue to identify strategies to improve our country's diet. Now we need a dialogue to see if we can identify a strategy to have the Food Stamps program follow suit. Ideas to consider include: a) improve funding for nutrition education as part of the eligibility process; b) offer incentives for the purchase of minimally processed fruits and vegetables, dairy products and grains. Perhaps discount these healthier foods via the EBT system; or c) Move towards treating foods with little or no nutritional value similar to the way we treat alcohol and tobacco - make them ineligible for purchase using food stamps. In making this last proposal, it is recognized that defining items that would be disallowed is a difficult task at best, but the dialogue around this issue would be a healthy one - it would be a dialogue for improving the health and well-being of all in our country.