
The Pennsylvania Welfare Coalition

223 North Street, P.O. Box 2835
Harrisburg, PA 17105

cpalm@comcast.net or fjv@pacatholic.org

Changing Patterns of Food Stamp Enrollment in Pennsylvania *75% of PA households receiving Food Stamps are not receiving welfare benefits* (2/2005)

In December 2004, for the first time since May 1997, Food Stamp enrollment in Pennsylvania exceeded one million individuals. The Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center estimates that 1.3 million Pennsylvanians are eligible for the Food Stamp Program based on their income.

From 1997 through 2004, Food Stamp enrollment steadily fell in the early years. However, beginning in 2001 as the economy experienced recession, enrollment began increasing climbing from a low of 733,292 during May 2001 to the current level of 1,007,439.

This is exactly the way counter-cyclical social welfare programs are designed to work. Public spending increases as private activity slumps, thereby stimulating the economy while also ameliorating the pain of those individuals who suffer lost income.

While overall enrollment at the end of 2004 is very similar to enrollment in May 1997, the composition of the caseload has shifted significantly. These shifts merit scrutiny prior to consideration by Congress of any changes in the structure or financing of the Program.

- Currently households that **do not** receive welfare (TANF or General Assistance) constitute the majority of the Food Stamp caseload.
- **In December 2004, 453,603 Pennsylvania households received Food Stamps; 75 percent (341,203) of those households were not receiving welfare cash benefits.** This contrasts to May 1997 when households that received welfare constituted the biggest share. This change reflects the steady and steep decline in the number of households receiving cash assistance (TANF), many of whom are now working but can not make ends meet without Food Stamps. Households receiving Food Stamps but not welfare include: **468,432 children and 80,733 older Pennsylvanians.**
- Despite the economic recovery that began in late 2001, **Food Stamp enrollment has continued to climb, particularly among the elderly and among households that had wages from employment.** In May 1997 Pennsylvania had 70,671 Food Stamp households in which there was no cash assistance and someone had a job. By December 2004 that number had jumped to 99,729, a 41 percent increase.
- **In May 1997 Food Stamp recipients in the 10 counties in the southeast and southwest corners of Pennsylvania constituted 58.5 percent of the caseload.** Now, they constitute only 52.8 percent. Both Allegheny and Philadelphia counties have fewer Food Stamp recipients now than then. Meanwhile, enrollment in many more rural counties in the "T" is up sharply -- Lancaster by 87 percent, Lebanon by 49 percent and York by 48 percent.

These data suggest that traditional linkages between cash assistance and Food Stamps, and between urbanized areas and Food Stamps, are loosening. New enrollment patterns that reflect the prevalence of low-wage employment are emerging. And Pennsylvania is probably only a few years away from a 50-50 enrollment split between the "T" and non-"T" counties.

Recommendations

Beginning in February the 109th Congress will debate whether to limit federal spending in the Food Stamp Program by block granting the Program to the states or by imposing a federal “spending cap”. Both approaches would cause serious harm to Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania’s working families, who have fallen upon hard times, stand to be harmed should Congress enact sweeping policy changes. The debate and decision-making should not minimize the central role adequate nutrition plays in ensuring that children are prepared for and succeeding in school and that citizens are healthy and productive. If we cut back on basic nutritional supports, we can expect the repercussions of these cuts to negatively impact on both educational and health systems – potentially with much greater costs to both families and states.

- **Oppose efforts to block grant the Food Stamp Program**

A block grant would eliminate the counter-cyclical feature of the Food Stamp Program. During times of recession, when need is greater, there would be no additional public spending available via the Food Stamp Program. This would lead to Food Stamp Program waiting lists, to greater suffering in affected households for children and families, and to deeper and longer economic recessions.

- **Resist spending caps on food and nutrition programs**

A spending cap would force cuts in benefits and restrictions in eligibility. This is the approach Congress adopted in 1996 as part of a budget-balancing effort. Subsequently, however, it realized that the cuts only served to undermine the goals of Welfare Reform, made the Program more administratively complex and increased the need at food pantries. Thus, Congress eventually reversed nearly all of the 1996 cuts. Reflecting these hard-won lessons, in 2002 the Bush Administration launched a new marketing and outreach campaign under the slogan “Food Stamps Make America Stronger.”

The Food Stamp Program has become a vital part of the household budget for many Pennsylvania households struggling to achieve self-sufficiency. The Program must remain strong. To cut it now will only lead to greater costs in the future.