



NATIONAL CONFERENCE *of* STATE LEGISLATURES

The Forum for America's Ideas

Stephen Saland
State Senator
New York
President, NCSL

Ramona Kenady
Chief Clerk of the House
Oregon
Staff Chair, NCSL

William T. Pound
Executive Director

March 1, 2002

Dear Chairman Harkin, Senator Lugar, Chairman Combest, and Representative Stenholm:

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) appreciates your dedicated leadership in ensuring that the reauthorization of the Farm Bill contains a well-funded and meaningful nutrition title. NCSL believes that an expanded nutrition title should include significant food stamp simplification provisions, quality control changes, restoration of food stamp benefits to legal immigrants, and benefit improvements. In these difficult economic times, state legislators see the importance of the Food Stamp program in their own communities, and urge you to ensure a strong state/federal partnership to deliver benefits to eligible children and adults.

We strongly support additional federal funding for the nutrition title and urge that the Senate funding levels be adopted. The nation's state legislators recognize that the Food Stamp program is a critical support for low-income families, and have been concerned about the decline in the participation of eligible families.

NCSL supports the adoptions of the quality control improvements in both bills. State legislators fully support the original intent of quality control- to ensure program integrity, to provide states with a management tool to identify problems in public assistance administration, and to facilitate corrective action. However, the present system has become too focused on process, not outcomes. The current rules penalize states that serve large numbers of recipients with earned income, foreign-born residents, recipients who have left welfare for work, and the working poor. We believe that providing incentives for improved performance and with better targeted sanctions, as you have proposed, will produce a more efficient program. We believe that the additional five percent sanction for "serious negligence" in the Senate bill is unnecessary and punitive, and urge that this sanction not be part of the final bill.

NCSL believes that food stamp simplification is critical. Food stamp simplification and quality control improvements will work together to improve access, administration and program integrity. Many recipients, especially former welfare families making their way off the welfare rolls and into employment, are daunted by the complex forms and confusing process of eligibility and benefit determination. The burdensome administrative requirements of the

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program has increased costs to state treasuries as well. Program simplification is not very costly, but it is critical to the states and will help eligible applicants receive food stamps more efficiently. We urge you to adopt all the Senate provisions on program simplification.

NCSL also supports the restoration of benefits to legal immigrants and urges you to adopt the largest possible increase for immigrant benefit restoration. NCSL strongly supported the 1996 welfare reform act, but opposed the legal immigrant restrictions in the law. There has been an enormous cost shift to the states since legal immigrants were denied food stamp benefits. Seventeen states have used their own funds to provide food stamp benefits to legal immigrants and even more have strengthened the emergency food system. Many states increased funds to food banks and pantries. These faith-based organizations and non-profits have reported increased usage by working legal immigrants denied food stamp assistance, even in a booming economy. It is critical that the federal government ends this cost shift, especially since forty four states are now experiencing budget difficulties. Restoring benefits will also greatly simplify the program.

NCSL is concerned about language in the Senate version that would require states to verify the entrance status of all legal immigrants. This may be impossible to implement. It would add back the administrative complexity that restoration of benefits removes from the program and increase federal and state administrative costs. Current information systems at the state and federal level do not contain this information. None of the 26 different documents that illustrate legal status in the United States contain this information. The Immigration and Naturalization Service has many different priorities. Their shortage of staff and current backlog of citizenship applications is well documented. Verifying entrance status would be so complex for state food stamp programs that quality control errors would inevitably result, with financial consequences for the states. Finally, this provision is contrary to our efforts to create consistency between the food stamp, Medicaid, and TANF programs.

Thank for your hard work on this important piece of legislation. State legislators would like to work with you to craft a strong nutrition title. If you have additional questions about NCSL's views, please contact Sheri Steisel, Federal Affairs Counsel and Senior Committee Director for Human Services. She can be reached at sheri.steisel@ncsl.org or by calling (202) 524-8693.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ray Meier". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning.

Senator Ray Meier
New York
Chair, Human Services Committee

cc: House and Senate Conferees