

**FARM BILL NUTRITION FORUM**  
**September 29, 2005**  
**NYC**

**Testimony by Edie Mesick, Executive Director**  
**Nutrition Consortium of NYS**

My name is Edie Mesick. I am the Executive Director of the Nutrition Consortium of New York State ("the Consortium"), a statewide, private non-profit organization dedicated to addressing problems of hunger. The Consortium's mission is to alleviate hunger for poor and near poor residents of New York State, by expanding the availability of, access to, and use of governmental nutrition assistance programs, through outreach, education and advocacy. Thank you for the opportunity to make comment on the important issues you raise regarding the Food Stamp Program (FSP) and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) scheduled for reauthorization in the 2007 Farm Bill.

**FOOD STAMP PROGRAM (FSP)**

I am very pleased to start with a focus on the strengths and accomplishments of the Food Stamp Program, since, as an organization dedicated to eradicating the very complex issue of hunger, we recognize the tremendous value of the Food Stamp Program. It is the premiere response to hunger in our nation and state. Its strengths include: the Food Stamp Program is available to all residents who are income/resource eligible (with the glaring exception of legal immigrants) and the fact that it is a federal program, with a national design, national eligibility standards and federal funding. Also, it is a nutrition program, not a cash support program. These features: general eligibility, national design and the absolute focus on access to food must be preserved.

In New York State each month, more than 1.7 million persons with limited resources are able to eat regularly and thus are healthier, use the costly health care system less and are able to lead more productive lives because of their participation in the Food Stamp Program. We also see the FSP as the premiere child nutrition program – it is 'education insurance' for children in low income families because it helps to put food on their tables 7 days a week 52 weeks each year, thus enhancing their ability to learn and helping children to get to their full potential.

Significantly, another accomplishment of this program is that we do not have starvation in our streets because many people in need can access the Food Stamp Program, and our national and state hunger and food insecurity rates are not worse, due to its availability.

While we acknowledge the significant successes of the Food Stamp Program, it is equally important that we acknowledge the urgent need for improvements to the design and administration of this essential nutrition assistance program, as evidenced by our nation's 11.2% food insecurity rate and the fact that only 54% of eligible persons participate nationally. Only 50% of persons in need and estimated

to be eligible for food stamps are participating in New York State. There are many opportunities for improvement, and we share our priorities below.

Congress and USDA should implement the following provisions in the 2007 Farm Bill to improve the Food Stamp Program:

- **Increase funds for Food Stamp Program administration.** In NYS, the state share of administrative costs is close to 60% (instead of 50%), resulting in a huge expense that limits our state's ability to fund the implementation of many improvements. We need the federal government to increase its contribution to FSP administrative costs. This change is essential to provide for adequate staffing and to encourage more effective use of technology to improve customer service, reduce payment errors and lower administrative costs.
- **Eliminate or minimize work requirements** to align the program more closely with other federal benefit programs, to improve access for low-income families (including the newly unemployed and part-time workers), and to make clear that the Food Stamp Program is a nutrition program.
- **Remove the asset limit for households below 130%** of the federal poverty level. The current asset limit is \$3,000 for elderly or disabled, and \$2,000 for all others.

**-or, at least**

**Raise asset cap level to \$10,000.**

- **Provide a standard medical deduction**, similar to the standard utility allowance, for use in calculating Food Stamp benefits. Allow persons whose medical bills exceed the standard deduction to use their actual costs.

**-or**

**Allow all medical expenses to be included** as a deduction for the purpose of calculating Food Stamp benefits.

- **Provide food stamps to all otherwise eligible legal immigrants.** Access to adequate food is a necessity. It directly impacts health and productivity. The federal government should restore federal Food Stamp eligibility to all legal immigrants.
- **Continue the USDA food stamp outreach national campaign** and funding for state outreach campaigns. Also, develop Food Stamp outreach TV commercials aimed at older adults, since this population is so needy and underrepresented in the program.

- **Permit recertification assistance services by food stamp outreach projects.** Allow the use of matched federal Food Stamp outreach funds for outreach programs like NYS' Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) to also assist households through the recertification process, if the household has a need.
- **Eliminate the interview requirement for recertifying households.** Allow households to reapply by mail; this would conform to most states' Medicaid rules.
- **Extend from two to four years the recertification period** for older adults without earned income.
- **Continue and expand funding for EBT services at Farmers Markets**  
Using pilot funding, NYS has successfully made the important and appropriate connection between the sale of farm fresh products and the FSP, by providing a wireless EBT service. Resources to continue and expand this effort should be an important priority for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- **Provide and expand annual incentive awards to states** that achieve the largest increases in Food Stamp Program participation. Measure performance and success by the increase in the percentage of eligible people participating and the state's decrease in levels of hunger and food insecurity, not on 'error-rates'.
- **Extend transitional food stamps from 5 months to 6 months** to better conform to other federal benefit programs.
- **Calculate benefit allotments using USDA's Moderate or Low-Cost Food Plan**, instead of the Thrifty Food Plan.
- **Increase the minimum monthly benefit from \$10 to \$50**
- **Permit the purchase prepared food** with Food Stamps. This would especially help older adults and those living alone or in housing with limited cooking facilities.
- **Extend opportunities for automatic enrollment in the FSP.** Like the SSI pilots, allow the use of applications for other means-tested programs as the basis for enrollment for Food Stamps (e.g., use state elderly pharmaceutical insurance programs, senior housing, senior meal sites receiving Child and Adult Care Food Program funds, heating assistance (HEAP), Medicaid, etc.).
- **Provide a minimum Food Stamp benefit for older adults** with incomes up to 185% of poverty. Eligibility for the Senior Farmers

Market Nutrition Program and senior meal sites is set at or below 185% of poverty.

- **Rename the Food Stamp Program**, thereby removing the obsolete reference to coupons, reducing stigma and providing opportunity for new outreach.

## **SENIOR FARMERS MARKET NUTRITION PROGRAM**

In addition, I welcome the opportunity to comment on the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP), an important resource for our older adults. The Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program is a healthful asset to both low-income seniors and farmers in New York State, providing both fresh and nutritious foods while helping local producers gain more sales. In FY 2004 New York received \$1.5 million out of \$16.7 million nationally. NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets, which administers the program, estimates almost 90,000 senior households received \$18 worth of farmers' markets coupons last summer and operated at 295 farmers markets in 61 counties, benefiting 888 farmers.

This program deserves to be continued through the reauthorization process, and expanded. The need and the demand for SFMNP greatly exceeds its funding level. We recommend that not less than \$75 million nationwide be provided to support this win/win program.

An upstate local Office for the Aging staff person recently shared with us that the demand for FMNP booklets is easily double the amount coupon booklets they are allotted. In fact, since the limited program is based on a first come, first served basis, their office receives calls from many seniors starting in the spring asking when the booklets will become available. Further, the NYS Dept. of Agriculture and Markets noted that in some rural counties, the coupon booklets are fully distributed to seniors within hours of when the local Office for Aging received them.

The SFMNP also provides an opportunity to connect low-income seniors with food stamps. The SFMNP apparently does not have the same stigma issues for seniors, and it provides a point of contact for older adults who self-declare themselves as low income; thus FSP information could easily be provided to each person who receives food coupons under the SFMNP.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we urge the continuation and support of the national Food Stamp Program with the implementation of improvements outlined above. We also urge continued support and expansion of the SFMNP. And again, thank you for the opportunity to share these comments.