

**Comments of Linda Stone
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Farm Bill HealthierUS Nutrition Forum
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Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. The Children's Alliance is a membership-based, multi-issue child advocacy organization. I have been working to end hunger in Washington State since 1986. I am going to restrict my comments today to the Food Stamp Program, or as we call it in Washington State, the Basic Food Program.

Program Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths:

- **National** program – as seen with Katrina;
- **Responsive** to economic change due to entitlement structure;
- Puts resources into hands of hungry then right into **local economies** with a significant multiplier impact;
- Shown to improve **nutritional intake** in low-income families.

Weaknesses:

- Provides **too little and often too late** – asset limits;
- Benefits are **not high enough to consistently support a nutritional diet**;
- Even after 2002 Farm Bill changes, the **program doesn't match who needs it in 2005** – primarily the working poor with unstable income.

Priority Improvements

- ◆ Peg benefits to a more reasonable food purchase plan, not Thrifty Food Plan
- ◆ Raise the eligibility limit – 135% excludes many poor families
- ◆ Eliminate the asset and vehicle limits
- ◆ Protect current Categorical Eligibility as used in many states, including WA
- ◆ Fully restore immigrant and refugee Food Stamps – no waiting period
- ◆ Medical deduction for all; Establish standard medical deduction as alternative to verifying expenses
- ◆ Continue error rate reform
- ◆ Categorical Eligibility for seniors on SSI/make CAP programs nationwide
- ◆ Extend waiver period for counting EITC against Food Stamp income
- ◆ Develop simplification models based on current use of Farm Bill options like simplified reporting and sell these to the states
- ◆ Raise dependent care deduction
- ◆ Exclude the income of anyone 18 years or younger
- ◆ Increase administrative funding
- ◆ Provide states with infrastructure funding – computer systems, handheld devices for farmers markets, etc.

Program Integration

This is harder than it looks. Washington had an ambitious plan to do six month reporting for TANF, Food Stamps and Medicaid. Computer glitches keep bumping the timeframe back. We finally got state legislation requiring implementation in October of 2004. By this time, Medicaid had gone to six-month reviews, adding complication. Since then, the Governor and legislature returned to 12-month continuous eligibility for children's Medicaid which should have streamlined the process. Our antiquated computer system in combination with state agency tendencies to make everything as complicated as possible, have made this less than optimal for low-income families.

Suggestions: promote models from states that are doing it right. Yes, it's a state option but USDA could do more to spread information about good state models.

Targeting vs. Simplification

If program benefits are pegged to a more reasonable food plan, the simplification of the program is more acceptable. Bottom line: really poor folks need the Food Stamp Program more than anyone else. Simplifying other rules to make the program work better, particularly for folks with earned income, seniors, etc, is a parallel goal.

Technology

Is anyone really doing a good job making Food Stamps accessible via the web? If so, get the word out on how to do it. Wizards are great tools for letting folks know how many benefits they can receive. We are finding that a well-staffed toll-free line, with a good database and trained staff is an essential piece in outreach. Bottom line: folks in communities helping people fill out applications should be able to connect directly with local offices; it's a win win.

Offsets

This country can find money when it needs to fight a war or rescue entire cities from disasters. We should not be looking for offsets to feed hungry families.

My solution: offsets come from ending tax breaks to folks who don't have to worry about where their next meal comes from.