

FRAC Statement on President's FY2009 Budget

As our nation's leaders debate ways to stimulate the economy and address the challenges posed by rising costs for food, energy, and housing, the proposals announced in the President's budget seek to erode the nation's commitment to addressing the needs of the 35.5 million Americans struggling against hunger. The President's budget reduces or eliminates many programs that help the poorest among us and misses opportunities to shore up the safety net they need.

For food stamps, the President's budget is inadequate. The funding increase that he proposes to account for rising food prices and additional participation reflects the requirements of current law in an environment of food inflation and caseload increases driven by a weak economy and efforts to enroll more eligible people. There also is a prudent contingency fund. For the fourth budget in a row, however, the President also proposes eliminating food stamp coverage for more than 300,000 people in low-income working families with children, a proposal that Congress wisely has rejected on the prior occasions. Moreover, the President's budget fails to fund some key food stamp improvements included in the Farm Bill, including an increase in the minimum monthly benefit that passed with bipartisan support in the House and Senate, that now are pending in the Farm Bill conference committee. And it ignores the advice of economists – from across the political spectrum – in the current stimulus debate who have recommended a short-term increase in food stamps to boost local economies.

The weak economy, coupled with record increases in the cost of food, has generated a heightened need for WIC. The WIC funding provided in the President's budget will not be enough to meet the expected need. It underestimates the growth in participation driven by the economic downturn and depends in part, for the money it does provide, on savings from a proposed cut to nutrition education funds and other WIC services. These cuts have been consistently rejected by Congress. The President's proposal also weakens the WIC contingency fund.

This also marks the third year in row that the budget has proposed the total elimination of funding for the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). This would cut off nutritious commodities to more than 473,000 low-income seniors, low-income mothers and children under age six in an average month. Many vulnerable elderly persons need both food stamps and CSFP to put food on the table.

The President's proposals, as a whole, add up to a missed opportunity to strengthen food assistance programs and more effectively address hunger and poverty in the U.S. at a time of growing need.

The impact of the President's nutrition program shortfalls and cuts are exacerbated by the many other cuts in supports for low-income families that he proposes – in the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, in child care assistance, in housing assistance, and in a number of other critical programs. Low-income families who face greater energy, food, housing and health costs and less support in every part of their budget often can only cut back where their budget is more flexible – not rent or health debts but food and energy. Were the President's proposals to be adopted, all of these cuts contribute to more hunger and deeper health and other problems in our communities.

FRAC will have ongoing analysis available on its Web site (www.frac.org).