

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 30, 2007

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Committee on Agriculture
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Saxby Chambliss
Ranking Member
Committee on Agriculture
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Chambliss:

As the Senate Agriculture Committee prepares to reauthorize the Farm Bill, we write urging you to strengthen federal anti-hunger and nutrition initiatives, particularly the Food Stamp Program.

We recognize that the current state of the federal budget complicates efforts to improve food assistance and other programs authorized in the Farm Bill. However, we believe that the economic challenges facing low-income Americans, together with pressing unmet needs in the Food Stamp Program, compel the Congress to make much-needed improvements.

By a number of measures, the current economic expansion has been disappointing for low-income families. Overall poverty remains relatively high, with the number of Americans living in poverty increasing by over 5 million people between 2000 and 2005. A total of 37 million individuals, including nearly 13 million children, are currently living in poverty in this country. Real wages for low-wage workers have been largely stagnant, and the expenses that many low-income households face (such as for rent and gasoline) have increased. The number of Americans experiencing food insecurity, as measured by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, increased from 31 million individuals in 1999 to more than 35 million individuals in 2005. As a result of these and other factors, the number of Americans receiving food stamps has gone up.

As the number of households participating in the Food Stamp Program has increased, there are several areas within the Food Stamp Program that we urge you to consider strengthening in the upcoming Farm Bill:

- *Benefit Erosion* – Food stamp benefits for most participating families are eroding over time. Current food stamp benefits average a mere \$1 per person per meal, and the minimum monthly benefit is stuck at the thirty-year-old level of \$10. These levels are insufficient for families to obtain an adequate diet.
- *Child Care Costs* – For purposes of income and benefit calculation, current Food Stamp Program rules allow eligible families to deduct up to \$175 of the cost of child care each month. This deduction covers slightly more than one-quarter of the average cost of child care in the United States. This deduction amount has been adjusted only marginally since it was established and is not currently indexed for inflation. The cap on the child care

costs that eligible households can deduct from their income calculation should be eliminated entirely, or at least raised.

- *Asset Limits* – As with child care costs, current asset limits in the Food Stamp Program have not kept pace with inflationary increases. If the 1977 asset limit of \$1,750 was adjusted each year to keep pace with inflation, the asset limit in the Food Stamp Program today would be nearly \$6,000. Instead, it has been raised by only \$250 to a meager \$2,000. The asset limit should be raised and tax-preferred retirements and educational savings should be excluded completely.

In addition, far too many people in our communities need food stamps but cannot receive them. Changes to current eligibility restrictions are needed to include legal immigrant adults and unemployed childless adults. Moreover, nearly half of all currently eligible people are missing benefits, often due to a lack of information or red tape barriers. Congress should continue efforts started in the 2002 Farm Bill to reduce unnecessary paperwork, streamline eligibility rules, and invest in outreach and enrollment efforts.

We understand that you must meet a number of priorities in the Farm Bill. However, securing an adequate diet to meet the basic needs of all Americans should be a top priority. We urge the Committee to strengthen the Food Stamp Program and other federal anti-hunger and nutrition initiatives in the Farm Bill, and we look forward to working with you on these important issues.

Sincerely,


Richard J. Durbin

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

Strengthen the Food Stamp Program in This Year's Farm Bill Reauthorization

May 30, 2007

Dear Colleague:

Please join me in asking the Senate Agriculture Committee to strengthen the Food Stamp Program and other federal anti-hunger and nutrition initiatives in this year's reauthorization of the Farm Bill.

A total of 37 million individuals, including nearly 13 million children, are currently living in poverty in this country – an increase of 5 million people between 2000 and 2005. Real wages for low-wage workers have been largely stagnant, and the expenses that many low-income households face (such as for rent and gasoline) have increased. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the number of Americans experiencing food insecurity has increased from 31 million individuals in 1999 to more than 35 million individuals in 2005. These factors have contributed to an increase in the number of Americans receiving food stamps.

In response to this increase, there are a number of key areas within the Food Stamp Program that should be considered for strengthening in the upcoming reauthorization of the Farm Bill. Food stamp benefits are eroding over time, with current food stamp benefits averaging a mere \$1 per person per meal and the minimum monthly benefit stuck at a thirty-year-old level of \$10. Program rules only allow families to deduct up to \$175 of the cost of child care each month from their income calculation, an amount that has been adjusted only marginally since it was established and is not currently indexed for inflation. Similarly, current asset limits in the Food Stamp Program have not kept pace with inflationary increases.

In addition, far too many people in our communities need food stamps but cannot receive them. Changes to current eligibility restrictions are needed to include legal immigrant adults and unemployed childless adults. Moreover, nearly half of all those who are currently eligible are missing benefits, often due to a lack of information or red tape barriers.

Securing an adequate diet to meet the basic needs of all Americans should be a top priority for the Congress. I hope you will join me in seeking to strengthen the Food Stamp Program and other federal anti-hunger and nutrition initiatives in the Farm Bill. If you are interested in signing the attached letter to the Senate Agriculture Committee, please call me or Mayra Alvarez (8-5748) of my staff. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin