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STATEMENT BY STACY DEAN, DIRECTOR OF FOOD ASSISTANCE POLICY, ON THE NEW USDA REPORT ON HUNGER

Even before the current economic downturn, some 13 million households, containing 36.2 million people, lacked access to adequate food at some point in 2007 because they didn't have enough money for groceries, according to today's release. These figures are a slight increase over the findings for 2006, but given the dramatic weakening of the economy in recent months, the number of "food insecure" households has likely grown considerably in 2008.

Food stamp caseloads — an indicator of those struggling to afford a basic diet — grew by nearly 2 million people between January and August 2008 (the most recent month for which we have data). The economic downturn also has coincided with a sharp increase in food prices, both of which have undoubtedly exacerbated hardship for many low-income families.

The report included three noteworthy findings.

- About 4.7 million of the 13 million food insecure households in 2007 had very low food security, with household members skipping meals or taking other steps to reduce the amount they ate because of a lack of resources. The size of this group and its share of the overall population have risen steadily over the past decade.
- The number of children with very low food security rose by over 60 percent, to 691,000.
- The number of food insecure seniors living alone rose by 26 percent, to 783,000.

Over the 2005-2007 period, food insecurity was greatest in Mississippi, New Mexico, Texas, Arkansas, and Maine. In addition, the new data likely *understate* food insecurity because they don't include homeless individuals or families.

Congress can take action to help struggling families by increasing food stamp benefits temporarily as part of a new round of economic stimulus. Not only would this help hard-pressed families put nutritious food on the table, it would also boost the overall economy by providing added business for food retailers and their suppliers. Each \$1 spent on food stamps generates \$1.84 in economic activity, according to USDA.

More broadly, the next President and Congress should consider setting a national goal to reduce poverty and acting upon it, as former Prime Minister Tony Blair did in the United Kingdom. That would significantly shrink the number of households that can't afford a decent diet. A number of charitable organizations and poverty experts have called for a national effort to cut poverty in half over the coming decade. At the same time, steps could be taken to enhance the federal food assistance programs to address hunger.

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