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## THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM'S CRITICAL ROLE IN HELPING CHILDREN

### **The Food Stamp Program is the Nation's Biggest Child Nutrition Program**

- The Food Stamp Program provides families with 13 million children with resources to purchase an adequate diet. This represents almost one in five children in the United States. Half of all food stamp recipients are children (and another 27 percent are adults who live with those children).
- Almost 80 percent of food stamp benefits go to families with children. In 2006, food stamps provided more than \$23 billion in food stamp benefits for families with children. More than half of this amount went to families with preschool-age children.
- A typical family with children on the Food Stamp Program has income (not including food stamps) at 53 percent of the poverty line. For a family of three, 53 percent of the poverty line corresponds to a monthly income of \$734, or an annual income of \$8,800.
- On average, families with children on the Food Stamp Program received \$300 in food stamps each month in fiscal year 2005, or \$3,600 a year.
- Nearly half (47 percent) of children who receive food stamps live in low-wage working families. In 2007 a typical family of three with a full-time minimum wage worker receives \$335 a month in food stamps, an amount that constitutes 30 percent of the family's monthly take-home income.

### **Food Stamps Significantly Reduce Poverty among Children**

- Food stamps lifted the disposable income of 1.0 million children over the poverty line in 2005. Food stamps protected more children — another 1.1 million — from extreme poverty (living with family income below half the poverty line) than any other program.
- Poor children are more likely to get food stamps than any other group — 82 percent of eligible children and 86 percent of eligible preschoolers get benefits, as compared with 56 percent of non-elderly adults and only 28 percent of elderly adults. Still, an estimated 2.6 million eligible children are missing out on benefits according to USDA's most recent estimates.

### **Food Insecurity and Poverty Remain High Among Families with Children**

- One in six children (17 percent) live in families that have difficulty affording adequate food

(known as “food insecurity” in USDA research).<sup>1</sup> A household with a child under six is about twice as likely to suffer from food insecurity as a household with no children.

- The current economic expansion has not reached low-income families. Poverty among children has increased from 16.3 percent in 2001 to 17.6 percent in 2005, the most recent year for which Census data on income and poverty are available.

## **Food Insecurity has Severe Consequences for Children<sup>2</sup>**

- Food insecurity is particularly harmful in prenatal life and early childhood when humans experience rapid growth in their bodies and brains. Inadequate nutrition stunts growth and development.
- Infants and toddlers from food insecure families are 90 percent more likely to be in fair or poor health and 30 percent more likely to have required a hospitalization. Children’s immune systems are impaired by malnutrition and therefore they are more likely to get sick.
- In older children food insecurity is associated with poorer physical health, decreased school achievement in reading and math, and more behavior and emotional problems, including risk of suicidal thoughts in adolescent girls.
- Families that get food stamps are less likely to be food insecure, resulting in decreased rates of Medicaid payments for preschooler’s anemia and malnutrition, decreased likelihood of child abuse, and improvement in reading and math. In older children, particularly girls, food stamps also have been shown to decrease the risk of obesity.

## **Food Stamp Improvements Needed**

- **Benefit adequacy.** Food Stamp benefits are very low — averaging just a dollar per person per meal — and are declining in value each year because of cuts from the 1996 welfare law that remain in effect. The erosion in the purchasing power of food stamps causes many families to run out of benefits before the end of the month.
- **Program Access.** Despite recent improvements, too many eligible households, especially working-poor families, legal immigrant families, and seniors, are missing out on food stamps. Further changes are needed to streamline and simplify program rules in order to ease barriers that are impeding eligible households from participating.
- **Retirement Assets.** President Bush has proposed changing food stamp rules so that families who lose their jobs but have managed to save for their retirement through an IRA are not excluded from food stamps. The current rule for food stamps makes no sense: it forces people

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<sup>1</sup> Household Food Security in the United States, 2005,” USDA, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program (C-SNAP) has studied the relationship between food stamps, food insecurity, and children’s health. See, *Food Stamps as Medicine: A New Perspective on Children’s Health*, February 2007, available at: <http://dcc2.bumc.bu.edu/csnappublic/Food%20Stamps-Medicine%202-12-07.pdf> and Deborah Frank, M.D., Testimony before the House Budget Committee, February 15, 2007, available at [http://budget.house.gov/hearings/2007/08frank\\_testimony.pdf](http://budget.house.gov/hearings/2007/08frank_testimony.pdf).

to choose between liquidating nearly all of their retirement savings to qualify for food stamps or risk not being able to put enough food on the table for themselves and their children during a period of need.

**Child care.** President Bush also has proposed allowing households to deduct the full amount of child care costs they incur when food stamp benefits are calculated. Many low-income families must pay a significant share of their income for the child care that enables them to go to work, and this can strain their ability to afford food. This change would help these hard working low-wage families.