

Food Stamp Program Priorities 2008

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Background: Each month, the Food Stamp Program provides benefits to 53,000 Vermonters in need. Over 80% of these benefits go to households with children; most of the rest go to households with an elderly or disabled member. Studies show that low-income children living in households that receive food stamps eat healthier, perform better in school, are less likely to be overweight and experience fewer cases of abuse and neglect. Not only do food stamps help families stay healthy and active, they also support Vermont's economy. Last year, the Food Stamp Program brought over \$54 million into the state, generating \$99 million in economic activity to support our local businesses and farmers.

Role of VTCECH: Since 2002, The Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger (VTCECH) has worked with the Department for Children and Families (DCF) and other outreach agencies across the state to improve program access, increase participation and streamline administration. During the past year, there have been many exciting developments, including:

- ❖ Piloting a peer-to-peer outreach model with the Vermont State Grange that trains members to conduct food stamp outreach activities aimed at increasing food stamp participation among seniors.
- ❖ Partnering with the Department for Children and Families and the University of Vermont to develop an online food stamp application, equip all DCF offices with document imaging and scanning systems and launch an automated food stamp hotline.
- ❖ Working with organizations across the state to implement EBT technology at farmers' markets.
- ❖ Technical assistance to City Market Co-op in their proposed demonstration project that would provide a 10% point of sale discount to all food stamp recipients on program eligible foods.

Rural Challenges:

- ❖ Benefit levels have failed to keep pace with rising cost of food and fuel.
- ❖ Many of Vermont's 237 towns lack access to a grocery store and are off the lines of public transit.
- ❖ Vermonters are very proud and many who are eligible refuse to participate because they view the program as "charity."

Program Priorities

- ❖ Ensure the strength of the Food Stamp Program by passing the strongest Nutrition Title of the 2007 Farm Bill possible
- ❖ Apply pressure to the USDA to approve the City Market Demonstration Project
- ❖ Fund pilot program aimed at increasing Food Stamp participation in rural areas: ex) mobile eligibility bus, outposting in rural areas
- ❖ Additional funding to expand Farmers' Market/EBT pilot
- ❖ Change the name of the Food Stamp Program
- ❖ Fund a Vermont pilot to provide additional food stamps benefits to low-income children with special dietary needs

Child and Adult Care Food Program Priorities 2008

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Background: Diets of infants and young children are deteriorating while rates of childhood obesity are rising. Children from low-income households are the most vulnerable to both health problems and overweight from poor nutrition, which can have permanent effects on development and learning. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides meals in child care, improving children's diets and helping young children learn healthy eating habits. Despite its documented benefits, this program is available in only 20% of Vermont child care centers and in fewer than half of child care homes. Vermont ranks 49th among the states in licensed child care center participation and 41st in family home provider participation.

The Role of VTCECH: The Campaign has launched an awareness effort aimed at increasing visibility of the program to providers. We are working with providers individually to provide information and training on how to participate in CACFP; and offering start-up grants to help them initiate the program.

Rural Challenges:

- ❖ For in-home child care providers, CACFP has a two-tiered reimbursement structure. It covers the full cost of meals only in high poverty areas (more than 50% of children in the school district qualify for subsidized school meals). In Vermont, poverty is spread out among the towns, not concentrated in urban areas. Many home providers in Vermont serve low-income families but do not qualify for the Tier I reimbursement.
- ❖ Smaller centers mean that Vermont providers cannot achieve the same economy of scale in their food preparation and program administration. Under current reimbursements, most centers cannot afford to hire the additional staff needed to prepare meals and do paperwork. Spread-out populations mean Vermont has negligible food vendors who cater specifically to child care centers and might otherwise absorb some of these costs.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ❖ As part of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization, include Vermont in the After-School Supper Program. This program allows after-school programs that serve low-income populations in Vermont to serve suppers. Several states (DE, IL, MI, MO, NY, OR, PA) are already a part of this program. In addition, schools should be allowed to provide suppers through the National School Lunch Program (not just CACFP) in order to reduce unnecessary administrative requirements.
- ❖ Apply pressure to the Food and Nutrition Service to implement the recommendations of the Paperwork Reduction Work Group outlined in the USDA's Final Report.¹
- ❖ Restore audit funds to 1998 levels, or 2% of program reimbursements. In the last decade, funding to the State Agencies that administer the food program has been cut in half. This means that child care providers and sponsors receive less support and resources.
- ❖ Fund an Institute of Medicine study on CACFP reimbursements. Vermont providers report that current reimbursements are too low to cover the cost of serving meals that comply with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. This study would establish the actual cost of nutritious meals.
- ❖ Expand the Nebraska rural eligibility pilot to Vermont and allow home providers in communities that have >40% low income children to receive the Tier 1 rates.

¹ Child and Adult Care Food Program Paperwork Reduction Work Group Final Report, February 2007.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Care/Regs-Policy/pdf-policymemo/2007-2008/CACFPpaperworkReductionReport.pdf>

Nutrition Education Priorities 2008

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Background: Cooking for Life is designed to improve food security for children living in families with limited budgets. Participants are provided with the skills necessary to make nutritious food choices through hands-on preparation of healthy meals. The program is a collaboration of the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger (VTCECH) and the University of Vermont Extension's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). Cooking for Life works with host agencies to offer the program in communities across the state. In a series of six 2 1/2 hour classes, 10-15 participants receive hands-on instruction in meal planning, budgeting, shopping, and cooking from area chefs and nutrition professionals. Since 1999, Cooking for Life has offered 338 series, serving 3650 low-income Vermont families. In 2007 alone, we reached 830 Vermont families with hands-on cooking and nutrition education.

Role of EFNEP: EFNEP nutrition educators are the primary educators for VTCECH's Cooking for Life series and are essential to the success of the series. More generally, they work in communities to provide nutrition, budgeting and cooking education to low-income parents and pregnant women through home visits and group classes. They also work to increase access to various nutrition assistance programs, such as food stamps, WIC and school meals. The program has been very effective in improving the health and nutrition of recipients: Studies in Virginia and Iowa showed that for every \$1 spent on EFNEP, over \$10 is saved in future healthcare costs. A study in Tennessee showed that for every \$1 spent on EFNEP, \$2.48 is saved in food expenses.

Rural Challenges:

- ❖ EFNEP funding has been cut so that only 6 of Vermont's 14 counties have an EFNEP educator. These six individuals must stretch themselves very thin, traveling long distances to cover several counties and can only provide services to fill the most extreme needs.
- ❖ Low income individuals and families in rural communities in Vermont are becoming increasingly isolated by the lack of public transportation and the consolidation of public services into the major population centers. In addition, Vermonters low wage jobs are increasingly without benefits that provide paid time off to travel to appointments to apply for benefits.

Opportunities for Improvement: Fund the Healthy Diets, Health Communities Initiative for a cost of \$325,000. The proposed project would

- ❖ Provide funding to place an EFNEP educator in every county in the state
- ❖ Enhance the responsibilities of educators, creating community nutrition experts by training them in all aspects of the local nutrition safety net
- ❖ Increase access to these educators by providing them with office space in several of the population centers in each county where citizens could meet with them
- ❖ Provide educators with training, computers and phone access
- ❖ Provide federal funding to expand the Cooking for Life program in rural areas of the state

School Meal Program Priorities 2008

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Background: School meals are a critical source of nutrition for children in Vermont, improving children's diets and health, as well as reducing rates of obesity and diabetes. School meals reduce hunger, increase the quality of the food that children and their families eat at home and improve students' behavior and academic performance. Schools that include food and nutrition in their curriculum and then complement classroom information with offerings in the cafeteria, help teach students important lessons about nutrition that will serve them for a lifetime.

Role of VTCECH: The Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger works with Vermont schools and communities to increase participation in the school lunch and breakfast programs. When these efforts began in 1994, only 20% of schools participated in school breakfast. Now 13 years later, over 90% of Vermont school participate in the program. VTCECH is now working to increase participation in existing programs and ensuring that vulnerable populations of students, including homeless and migrant students, have access to quality school meals.

Rural Challenges:

- ❖ School meal reimbursement is inadequate for small rural schools. Data from 2002 shows that on average, Vermont schools lost 20 cents for every school breakfast they served to a low-income child.
- ❖ Food service directors report that they are not able to purchase fresh and local foods because they do not have adequate funds
- ❖ Schools sell a la carte and vended foods, often of poor nutritional value and stigmatizing for low-income students, in order to supplement the federal program meals because of the low reimbursements.
- ❖ Households that make 130-185% of poverty are not able to pay the 70 cents for breakfast and lunch, because the federal poverty level is unrealistic. In Vermont, the rate of participation by reduced price students is significantly lower than that for free eligible students.
- ❖ In order for schools to feed children throughout the year and provide suppers in the evening, they must participate in three separate programs, with three different applications, reporting requirements, and reimbursements: School breakfast and lunch, Child and Adult Care Food Program (vacations, holidays, evening meals) and Summer Food Service Program (summer). Small schools often do not have the infrastructure to support the administrative costs of running three programs so rural children have less access to meals when school is closed.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ❖ Initiate a pilot program to provide a higher meal reimbursement rate to schools in rural states, tied to higher nutritional requirements.
- ❖ Initiate a Vermont pilot program to provide free breakfast and lunch to children living in families up to 185% of poverty.
- ❖ Allow the Department of Defense's Fruit and Vegetable program and the commodity program to give preference to local products in schools.
- ❖ Request that the GAO do a cost assessment of school meals that evaluates the effect of school size on meals costs. Streamline the child nutrition programs such that a single program can feed children throughout the year, including holidays and vacations.

Summer Food Program Priorities 2008

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Background: The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides free meals, often in conjunction with enriching programming, to low-income children during the summer months when school is closed. SFSP is an important nutrition resource for working families, who depend on free or reduced price school meals during the academic year to provide consistent, nutritious meals. During the summer months, family food budgets are stretched, and often families need to rely on cheap, high-calorie food with low nutritional value. SFSP is an important tool in the prevention of childhood obesity. Recent research suggests that children gain BMI (body mass index) twice as fast during the summer months than the school year². For many children, weight gain during the summer months is a direct result of lack of consistent nutritious meals and affordable, enriching activities.

Role of VTCECH: The Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger provides outreach and technical assistance to help communities establish and expand Summer Food Service Programs. We facilitate local groups to address the community's needs and identify partners to implement local programs, assist with the guidelines and application process for the federal requirements of the program, and help secure funding for site-specific needs.

Rural Challenges:

- ❖ SFSP is underutilized in Vermont. Only 1 out of 4 children who receive free or reduced price meals during the school year participates in the program³.
- ❖ Poverty is dispersed in most school districts. In order to operate “open” summer food sites, which provide free meals to all kids regardless of eligibility documentation, at least 50% of students in the local school must be enrolled in the free or reduced price school meal program. Especially in rural areas, where population is dispersed, many schools do not reach the 50% threshold.
- ❖ Rural communities often support several small summer food sites, which lack economy of scale. Complex accounting and bookkeeping measures and low reimbursement rates are especially burdensome on small summer food sites.
- ❖ Lack of transportation resources during the summer months leave many low-income kids isolated and at home, with no means to access enriching programming or meals at a centralized location.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- ❖ Support S. 1755 and H. 2968, and advocate for Vermont’s inclusion in the **Summer Food Rural Expansion Act**, which allows communities with 40% low-income children to operate “open” summer food sites. The Summer Food Rural Expansion Pilot would immediately affect 61 schools and communities, and 13,000 children enrolled in those schools. Senator Sanders has signed on to S. 1755.
- ❖ Continue to advocate for Vermont’s inclusion in the **Simplified Summer Program**. All three Vermont congressional members have signed on to legislation which would reduce complex accounting rules, and make the program less burdensome.
- ❖ Advocate for **rural transportation grants**, which school and communities can use during the summer months.

² Von Hippel, et al. *American Journal of Public Health*, 97(4), 2007.

³ Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), “Hunger Doesn’t Take a Vacation Report”, 2007.