



Advocacy Alert

OREGON FOOD BANK
OREGON HUNGER RELIEF TASK FORCE

August 2005
Volume 11 Issue 8



take five

(actions that take five minutes or less)

Action:

Contact your members of Congress urging them to make protecting food stamps a priority.

Message:

- ✓ The Food Stamp Program is one of the best defenses against hunger.
- ✓ Any funding cut in the Food Stamp Program will harm low-income families and should be soundly rejected.
- ✓ Please voice your support and concern to your colleagues on the Agriculture Committee.

Take Action with ease...

www.oregonfoodbank.org



ADVOCATE

Legislative Yellow Pages

State Legislative Information
1-800-332-2313 (outside Salem)
(503) 986-1000 (in Salem)
www.leg.state.or.us/citizenguide

Federal Legislative Contacts
Rep. Wu (District 1)
(503) 326-2901
Rep. Walden (District 2)
(541) 776-4646
Rep. Blumenauer (District 3)
(503) 231-2300
Rep. DeFazio (District 4)
(541) 465-6732
Rep. Hooley (District 5)
(503) 588-9100
Senator Smith
(503) 326-3386
Senator Wyden
(503) 326-7525

Report highlights Oregon's success

Over the years, Oregon has consistently ranked above the national average in hunger. Studies conducted by OSU researchers Mark Edwards and Bruce Weber highlight that in Oregon more than other states, the face of those who experience hunger come from working families. This is where the federal Food Stamp Program comes in. The Food Stamp Program effectively and efficiently delivers food benefits to millions of low-income families. And as a new report released by Oregon Food Bank shows, more eligible Oregonians are utilizing this important nutrition program.

"Food stamps are a life-saver – the difference between putting good food on the table for my family or

not," says Ruby Stoker of Junction City. Although her husband, Ron, works full time at a job he's held for 12 years, his wages aren't sufficient to cover the basic needs of his wife and five children. The family relies on food stamps and emergency food to make ends meet.

The Stokers aren't alone. Research by the USDA reveals that more working families are turning to food stamps to help make up the difference between low wages and increasing expenses. This is especially true in Oregon where we have made use of the state option to expand eligibility to more working families.

All food stamp participants must meet two income tests. The gross income test measures income before

any deductions. The net income test is a measure of income after allowable deductions such as medical expenses, housing costs, child care costs and work expenses. In order to qualify for food stamps a person's net income must be at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) which is \$16,090 annually for a family of 3. In Oregon, the gross income test, the measure of income before deductions, is 185 percent FPL. Nationally the gross income standard is 130 percent FPL. This flexibility allows the state to extend benefits to thousands of low-income working families who have high work-related expenses and therefore limited resources for food, families like the Stokers and the Bounds who *(continued on page 2)*

Questions remain about unfinished business

With the pressure in the Capitol letting up a little as House and Senate leadership reach a tentative budget agreement, legislators were able to turn their attention back to some of the pending hunger relief bills.

The Governor will have the opportunity to sign into law two bills aimed at increasing state funding for important nutrition programs. Both the WIC/Farmer's Market bill, SB 289, and the Summer Food bill, SB 467 have passed both chambers and are finally headed to the

Governor's desk. Although, in a last minute tentative budget agreement, \$49,000 was removed from the WIC/Farmer's Market program. We need to work to restore funding.

The budget agreement includes full funding for the general fund food grant, funds that are used to assist the emergency food network. The budget agreement also includes increased funding for Oregon Opportunity Grants for low-income students going to college.

However, our legislators haven't taken final action on several important bills aimed at providing relief for many of our most vulnerable neighbors. Unfinished business includes the Refundable Earned Income Tax Credit (HB 2542), restructuring and restoration of General Assistance, Payday Loan reform (SB 545), and implementation of the Parents as Scholars pilot program (SB 768).

Contact your legislators urging them to do everything in their power to address these issues before they go home.

About to be left behind?

Poorest of the Poor

As the session winds down, we remain concerned that some of the most vulnerable Oregonians will be left behind. Without swift action, that will be the case for the poorest of the poor who look to General Assistance for a minimal amount of support, people like Martin who called advocates at Oregon Food Bank when he fell victim to the first round of cuts to the GA program. He was facing homelessness and barely scraping by with emergency food and food stamps but the concern he raised is that without cash assistance from GA, just a few hundred dollars each month, he didn't have enough money for toilet paper.

The GA program is the safety net for those with little or no income or resources. It is a temporary bridge of support for Oregon adults with a

disability who are waiting for their Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and/or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits to be approved. They must meet the needs test of having a disability of at least one year, no more than \$40 in cash and \$1,500 in resources and who are unemployable. GA provides a monthly stipend of \$314. Eligible recipients must apply for SSI and sign an "interim assistance agreement". The agreement allows the state to recover from the federal government the amount of the cash support advanced to the successful SSI applicant. GA payments stop once SSI certification takes place and money paid by the state is reimbursed. It can be characterized as a 'floating bridge' program. During the 2003-2005 biennium, the state recovers on GA returned \$5.9 million to Ore-

The average length of time a person remained on General Assistance before being approved for SSI/SSDI is 16 months; however, the hearing process is horrendous. This program was eliminated during the 2001-2003 biennium in order to help balance the state's budget and it was not included in the Governor's Balanced Budget for the 2003-2005 biennium. And, yet again, the GA program is not included in the Governor's Recommended Budget for 2005-2007.

The fiscal impact of this program would \$3.1 million from the general fund. The House and Senate budgets fund the Governor's reshoot proposal for 3 months of the current program. Without additional appropriation, GA will cease to exist.

Tax Fairness for Working Families

A proposal to expand the state's Earned Income Tax Credit for working poor families is alive in the waning days of the 2005 Legislature.

HB 2542 contains a variety of changes to the tax system, including provisions to reconnect to the federal working family tax credit and to expand Oregon's Earned Income Tax Credit over the next few years. The key change is that the bill would make the Earned Income Tax Credit "refundable" in 2006, meaning families who owe little or no state tax could receive the full credit in the form of a refund check.

It is time to pass tax fairness for working poor families this session. Expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit is long overdue and working families need tax relief.



The Advocacy Alert is published jointly by the Oregon Food Bank (OFB) and the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force (OHRTF).

OFB Advocacy Staff:
 (503) 282-0555 [Portland area]
 1-800-777-7427 [outside Portland]
 Kim Thomas X206
 Angela Martin X204
 Cassandra Garrison X210
 Julie Massa X267
<http://www.oregonfoodbank.org>
advocacy@oregonfoodbank.org

OHRTF Staff:
 Patti Whitney-Wise
 (503) 963-2290
patti.w@hcs.state.or.us

Holly Wilkalis, (503) 963-2292
holly.wilkalis@hcs.state.or.us

Nancy Weed, (503) 998-6194
nancy@oregonhunger.org

Getting food stamps to eligible families *(continued from page 1)*

shared their stories in this year's report on food stamp participation.

Oregon's success could be short lived if a proposal to take away this flexibility and cut funding makes it out of Congress. Despite the undeniable success of the Food Stamp Program and the bi-partisan support for the program's goals, federal policymakers are currently debating changes that would harm the many working families, seniors and people with disabilities who rely on food stamps. As part of this year's budget agreement, the Senate and House Agriculture Committees must cut \$3 billion over five years

from programs under their jurisdiction, which includes agriculture subsidies, food stamps, and conservation programs. One proposal currently under debate would result in food stamps receiving approximately 60 percent of the cuts, or \$1.7 to \$2 billion. The President's proposal called for allocating only 7 percent of the total agriculture spending cuts to the Food Stamp Program. Any cut above the President's proposal should be soundly rejected.

In addition to the budget threat, the House welfare reauthorization bill contains two proposals that would undermine the national

benefit structure by allowing states to overturn current food stamp rules. These proposals would also permit states to shift money out of food assistance for low-income families into other programs.

All of our congressional representatives need to hear from us, urge them to make protecting food stamps a priority. See this month's "take five."

For a copy of the report, *Supporting healthy families: Oregon Food Stamp participation at the county level*, visit: www.oregonfoodbank.org and click on "advocate."