

Written Testimony
of
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Before the
Senate Agriculture Committee

Hearing on the Food Stamp Program

April 10, 2007

Thank you. It's a pleasure to address this committee, and an even greater pleasure to have you here with us in Georgia. I think you'll find, as I have, that Georgians earn their reputation for hospitality, caring concern, and a common purpose rooted in faith. Wedded to that genuine compassion is also a stubborn practicality that demands results. In the Food Stamp Program we have both.

Food Stamps can be the difference between children who get a good start in life - and those born weighing too little. Between students who can absorb and learn at school - and those whose spirit is absent because their bodies are deprived. Between having the basic necessities of life - and choosing whether to have food, electricity, or transportation this month. Between a retirement spent among friends and family in one's own home - and a decline into dependence because of poor nutrition and fading health.

In other words, the Food Stamp Program is the cornerstone of all social services - and contributes to people's lives far beyond the dinner table. Invited to address you today, we thought we'd focus on a few enhancements that would make a great program even better, and promote good outcomes in other areas of human services as well. Like a team member that excels in his or her job, we see other ways the FSP can contribute to the larger goal of overall wellbeing for families and individuals. Today we'll focus on three areas: expanding the use of technology; strengthening the focus on building self-sufficiency; and improving the way we serve the elderly.

The focus dual focus of the program is expanding access and ensuring quality by reducing errors. We believe every state would see immediate benefits in both of those areas with a greater investment in technology. In the past it was true that low-income citizens had little access to technology. When cell phones came in satchels and internet providers charged by the minute, it was easy to think that technology didn't matter to this population. Today the world is different; the use of technology pervasive. That gives us a tremendous advantage and new opportunities to do better work.

Thanks to a \$1 Million Food Stamp Program Participation Grant from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service and \$2 Million from Governor Perdue and the Georgia Technology Authority, Georgia will soon make it possible for consumers to begin the food stamp

application process, report changes in household income, schedule interview appointments, and receive a checklist of verification items they'll need - all on the web.

There are certain things only our workers can do, such as conducting interviews with applicants and approving their applications. And then there are things that anyone can do, such as typing in their own personal information. If we can process 35% of applications online each year, we'll save our workers approximately 240,000 hours. That means they'll be able to do a lot more of the things only they can do, improving quality, and reducing errors. It also will cut down the wait time for applicants, making it easier and more convenient to access the benefits of the Food Stamp Program.

There's another benefit as well, one we've seen already with the EBT cards. There's a great difference between managing an account and waiting for a check to arrive in the mail. Technology has the ability to give clients more control over and greater participation in the services they receive.

Employing technology is a good first step in instilling self-sufficiency, but only a beginning. The FSP itself is even more important in that regard - so important that strengthening its focus on self-sufficiency would have a positive impact on other human services.

We'd like to see FSP services for ABAWDs - the Able Bodies Adults Without Dependents - function more like TANF. The combination of stricter requirements and more expansive assistance has helped Georgia reach a TANF work participation rate of 68.1%, with many counties having no mandated adults at all. And because of enhanced welfare-to-work supports such as job coaching and transitional supports, they are able to stay employed; those returning to TANF represent about 8% of the total client population. As one of the most useful and reliable tools in our human services toolbox, the FSP could do even better work for us with enhanced work requirements and incentives.

Another good example of strengthening self-sufficiency is our Fatherhood Program. Congress decades ago recognized how important child support is to making sure children are raised in economically self-sufficient households. It also happens to be the case that children who are raised with some kind of relationship with their fathers - and most of our non-custodial parents are fathers - are far, far better off: boys less likely to wind up in jail, girls less likely to get pregnant as teens, and both more likely to finish high school. So child support is something we take very seriously.

Our Fatherhood Program invests in training and educational programs for father and mothers to help them get better-paying jobs so they can meet their child support obligations and be a bigger part of their children's lives. This year so far we've had over 2,300 participants, 60% of whom have gotten new or better jobs. We're even reaching out to prison populations to who are getting ready to transition back into society.

What the Fatherhood Program accomplishes is greater self-sufficiency for children and their custodial parent as well as for the non-custodial parent. Children benefit from a sustained relationship with their fathers, which produces even greater social good. All of this from giving

noncustodial parents the help to get a better job.

The larger point is that to help boost clients into better lives, we must not only feed them today, but give them the ability to feed themselves tomorrow.

For those who are past their working years, the Food Stamp Program becomes an even more important source of support and sustenance. The elderly are one of our most vulnerable populations, and their ranks are growing. Many of them live on small, fixed incomes, but because they may have other benefits, such as Social Security, they often qualify only for the minimum food stamp benefit - just \$10 a month. In fact, 62% of the people receiving the minimum benefit in Georgia are single persons over the age of 60.

The good news is that we have a minimum benefit to offer them. The bad news is that it hasn't been adjusted since 1974. That \$10 today has approximately one-fourth of the buying power as it did back then. For the cost of a quart of milk, a dozen eggs, and a loaf of bread in 1974, today you might be able to get a half-pint of milk, 3 eggs, and enough bread for a couple of sandwiches.

We believe the single most effective thing to help seniors would be to raise that minimum benefit to at least \$25 a month. That would not only increase the value of the benefit in proportion to increased costs, but it would also make it more likely that seniors would apply and continue participating in the program. With everything involved in getting to the office and filling out the paperwork, it's not surprising that some seniors would decide it's not worth \$10 a month. So they choose to skip the program entirely - and skip a few meals as well.

Increasing the asset limit would also help seniors in respect to the amount of benefits they can qualify for. People are living longer, with life expectancy climbing to nearly 78 years. They'll need the homes, IRAs, and everything they've managed to save to make it. We can make food stamps even more valuable to them by taking that into account.

We also need to consider their unique circumstances and the role they continue to play in the lives of their families and our communities. Today, more than 164,000 children in Georgia are living in a household headed by a grandparent, children who might otherwise be in the foster care system. We'd rather have them in the loving arms of family, and grandparents can provide that. Through our department-wide Grandparents Raising Grandchildren initiative, we prioritize those seniors for many services, give them an extra \$50 a month above and beyond what relative placements usually receive, and make available an initial lump-sum payment to help make their homes ready to raise children again. Enhanced food stamp benefits would help both those seniors and the children they care for.

I cannot begin to imagine how we would do our jobs as social service providers without the FSP. On the contrary, what I can easily imagine is how we could make it an even more integral part of our overall package for strengthening families and making individuals more self sufficient. We believe that with a few enhancements, that will happen in Georgia and across the country.

In addition, we would encourage you to think of new ways to help drive our work in that

direction. Holding states accountable with penalties is necessary but not sufficient to optimize the Food Stamp Program and expand its impact. Balancing those with additional incentives can give all of us something higher to reach for, producing better long term social outcomes and paying dividends to America for a long time to come.

Thank you. I'd be glad to answer any questions.

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