

2007 FARM BILL

First, I would like to thank Chairman Harkin, Senator Salazar and members of the Committee for the opportunity to speak today about the importance of the Food Stamp and Nutrition Programs for Colorado. I am Kathy White and am here today to represent the Colorado Anti-Hunger Network or CAN. CAN works to alleviate hunger through advocacy, food policy, research, and resource development.

Our top priority for the 2007 Farm Bill is a strong nutrition title that improves the Food Stamp Program in three broad areas: adequacy of benefits, access, and eligibility.

The Food Stamp Program is a critical tool in the fight against hunger in Colorado. In an average month today the Food Stamp Program provides more than a quarter of a million Coloradans with the means to purchase food for a nutritious diet. More than 80 percent of the beneficiaries of food stamps are families with children, the rest are elderly and disabled people. The small benefit, on average about \$1.19 per meal, makes a big difference in the health and lives of thousands of Coloradans.

Food stamps are also an important work support, acting as a temporary bridge for working poor families that are struggling toward self-sufficiency. Colorado has a high number of food stamp recipients who work, but have incomes too low to meet their basic needs. Without food stamps, many of these folks would be forced to choose between enough food to eat and other basic necessities, like rent, utilities or medical care.

Colorado demonstrated the need for the Food Stamp Program when we implemented a new computer system. When CBMS, the state's new public benefits computer system, went online, thousands of families were unable to access their food stamp benefits. As a result, food pantries around the state experienced a spike in need that could not be met. Some that had operated successfully for decades were forced to shutter their doors in the face of overwhelming demand. We know our nonprofit and private sectors simply can't do it alone.

While critical for families, food stamps also provide a vital economic stimulus for Colorado.

? In FY 2006, food stamp benefits pumped over \$323 million federal dollars into local Colorado communities through neighborhood supermarkets, farmers markets and mom and pop stores.

? On average, every \$1 billion of food purchases by food stamp recipients generates 3,300 farm jobs.

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In short, the food stamp program helps families, farmers and our economy.

What's more, the program does this all extremely efficiently. With the EBT cards and other simplifications made over the past few years, the Food Stamp Program has become one of the most effective federal programs, with more than 98 percent of benefits going to eligible households, according to the GAO. While Colorado's error rate has been an issue recently, this is due to a computer problem that we're resolving. The state has typically not had a significant

problem with errors.

By all accounts, the food stamp program is an effective and important anti-hunger and anti-poverty tool for Colorado. Yet the program falls short in reaching all households in Colorado that do not have enough food on their tables.

As you prepare to draft the Farm Bill, we particularly wish to stress the following needs that must be addressed in the nutrition title of the bill.

First, we must improve access to the program by providing additional resources to streamline systems, simplify program rules and expand education and outreach. Too many eligible households, especially seniors, legal immigrants and working poor families are missing out. It is estimated that only 56 percent of all eligible families in Colorado receive food stamps, and the participation rate for eligible working poor families is even lower.

Second, we believe it is imperative Congress improve the adequacy of the benefits. The minimum benefit is so low that it creates a disincentive for eligible participants to navigate the complicated application process. One food bank provider serving the Colorado Springs area surveyed families receiving Food Stamps and found that the average monthly benefit lasted only two weeks. Moreover, the value of the benefit continues to erode for many food stamp recipients due to the static standard deduction. The inadequate benefit of \$1.19 per meal is declining in purchasing power each year. According to one analysis, in FY08 Colorado benefits will be \$13 million less than they would have been if the standard deduction had been indexed to inflation.

Thirdly, we should build on the progress made in the 2002 Farm Bill to restore eligibility to certain needy groups, such as legal immigrants and their children, and unemployed childless adults.

Our member organizations also wish to stress the importance of nutrition education in fighting hunger. Greater efficiency might be found in directing USDA to revisit how volunteer hours are allowed to be used by non-profit, non-governmental agencies as a match for the Food Stamp Nutrition Programs. At the present time only public entities can use volunteer hours as in-kind match, yet non-profit organizations are the experts at the use of volunteers.

Finally, the CAN asks that Congress strengthen and enhance both the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). Congress could strengthen the TEFAP program by increasing food purchases and providing a floor for bonus commodities similar to the FY01-02 level.

The CSFP program is a vital nutrition program in Colorado meeting the unique needs of some 12,200 Coloradans, mostly seniors. Congress should simplify the program by removing the priority system and allowing all clients to qualify at 185 percent of poverty. Given the changing demographics across the country, Congress should take the opportunity to develop a senior pilot program to help expand CSFP to more states.

The 2007 Farm Bill is a wonderful opportunity to build on the advances made in 2002 and we

look forward to continuing to work with Congress and other Coloradans toward a sound and strong nutrition title. Thank you again for your time.