



ANTI-HUNGER PRIORITIES FOR THE TRANSITION TEAM –  
PART I: LEGISLATIVE AND BUDGETARY\*

**Summary:**

- Hunger in the U.S. was increasing before the recession, and is now increasing rapidly.
- An immediate needed response is a food stamp benefit boost – which will help struggling families and is, dollar-for-dollar, the best economic stimulus – as well as other temporary nutrition program enhancements that will promote jobs and the recovery.
- The 2010 budget should also include a significant funding boost to strengthen the child nutrition programs when they are reauthorized next year.
- Additional investments should occur starting in the 2010 budget to get the nation on a path to meet the President-Elect’s goal of ending childhood hunger by 2015.

**1. Background**

Even before the current recession, the decade’s economic growth was not trickling down, and persistent hunger has been a major problem. The number of people in the broadest Census Bureau/USDA category of food insecurity/hunger rose from 33.2 million in 2000 to 35.5 million in 2006 and then jumped to 36.2 million in 2007. The number in the more severe subcategory –in households with “very low food security,” meaning that one or more people in the household are hungry – rose from 8.5 million in 2000 to 11.1 million in 2006 and then leapt to 11.9 million in 2007. This was a jump of 40 percent in seven years.

The 2007 data, grim as they are, largely predate the damage of the current recession. The official 2008 hunger numbers won’t be released until late 2009, but every report from food stamp offices, WIC programs, schools, social service agencies, and emergency food providers portrays a rising tide of increasingly desperate need.

On the positive side, the central federal nutrition programs – SNAP/Food Stamps (SNAP is the acronym for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the new federal name for the Food Stamp Program), school lunch and breakfast, WIC, child care food, and summer and afterschool food – are entitlements (except WIC), are sound programs and have been able to expand participation to meet at least part of the growing need. In the 13 months from July 2007 to August 2008, as the economy unraveled, SNAP/Food Stamp participation rose by nearly three million people. In 23 states, as of August, 2008 (the latest data available) more than one in ten residents is receiving food stamps.

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\* We will submit a separate paper on high priority regulatory and administrative matters.



Efforts to eliminate or dilute the programs' entitlement status (by the Reagan Administration in 1981-1982, by Congress in 1995-1996, and by the Bush Administration in recent years) have been beaten back. These were fundamentally important victories that preserved the ability of the programs to respond in times of rising need. In many ways, the nutrition programs are the strongest part of the national safety net that is still intact and has positive "countercyclical" effect. The programs have weak spots in both eligibility and payment levels, and benefit amounts in SNAP/Food Stamps in particular fall short of what is truly needed for an adequate, healthy diet, but the programs present a very strong foundation on which to build.

In October 2008, the Obama-Biden campaign released an excellent platform, Obama and Biden: Tackling Domestic Hunger, which committed to ending childhood hunger in the U.S. by 2015. That document also highlighted the need for an immediate SNAP/Food Stamp increase to help struggling families and to serve as an economic stimulus in the recession, and noted that reducing poverty (e.g., by raising the minimum wage and expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit) is an essential component of an anti-hunger strategy. The plan called as well for further improvements in school meals access, summer food, and other child nutrition programs, SNAP/Food Stamps, and nutrition supports for seniors.

Strengthening the federal nutrition programs is essential not only to President-Elect Obama's proposed anti-hunger effort, but also to many other domestic priorities. The nutrition programs improve the quality of early childhood education; improve school achievement; support local nonprofits (e.g., child care centers, afterschool and summer programs); and reduce obesity. And given President-Elect Obama's anti-poverty goals, investments in SNAP/Food Stamps are among the quickest and most cost-effective ways to make measurable progress toward reducing poverty as well. As a recent Center for Budget and Policy Priorities analysis shows, SNAP/Food Stamp benefits and the Earned Income Tax Credit are the two most effective programs in lifting children above the poverty line; and SNAP/Food Stamps is by far the single most effective program in lifting children out of deep poverty – to above 50 or 75 percent of the poverty line.

## **2. Priorities**

In brief, then, there is a major hunger problem in this country, and it is getting worse; but we have the tools with which we can address it. There are three key budgetary/legislative steps to take if the nation is to mitigate some of the impact of the recession right now and then begin to reach President-Elect Obama's goal.

1) Include a SNAP/Food Stamp benefit boost and other nutrition initiatives in stimulus/economic recovery legislation. A SNAP/Food Stamp benefits boost of up to 20 percent for up to 18 months is desperately needed by beneficiaries, and by the economy. The Democratic Congressional leadership in both the House and the Senate has sought to advance legislation that includes a boost in SNAP/Food Stamp allotments as part of the stimulus/recovery effort, and President-Elect Obama has endorsed that idea. Economists from all points on the political spectrum call a SNAP/Food Stamp boost the single best form of stimulus, dollar for dollar. Mark Zandi of Moody's Economy.com, who also was an advisor to Senator McCain's campaign, calculates that each dollar of added SNAP/Food Stamp benefits adds \$1.73 to the economy; a dollar of infrastructure spending produces \$1.59; aid to the states adds \$1.36; a refundable tax rebate boosts the economy \$1.26; and a corporate tax cut produces \$.030 for each dollar invested.



Of course, this is more than a stimulus; in this terrible economy, beneficiaries desperately need a boost to begin to be able to afford an adequate diet. SNAP/Food Stamp benefits are based on the Thrifty Food Plan – a government market basket of minimally adequate foods that research shows low-income households, whether seniors, families with children, or working age adults, can rarely afford with the amount of benefits the government provides. Rapid food price inflation means that SNAP/Food Stamp allotments have fallen further and further behind. From September 2007 to September 2008, the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan rose 10.3 percent (general food inflation rose 7.6 percent). The gap between benefit allotments and what families actually spend is rising every month.

Other recovery-related nutrition initiatives should include:

- an increase in state administrative funding so states can handle the flood of food stamp applications they are getting (without federal help they are laying off rather than adding staff);
- suspension for at least the remainder of school year 2008-2009 of school and child care center meal program co-payments (e.g., the “reduced price” for breakfast and lunch that struggling parents with incomes slightly above poverty more and more often can’t pay, so their children don’t eat);
- strategies to boost summer programming and summer nutrition in summer 2009 (hunger in the U.S. peaks in the summer when children are out of school, not in the winter); and
- an increase in TEFAP emergency food funding, WIC funding and Commodity Supplemental Food Program funding to respond to rising demand and food costs.

2) Include in the 2010 budget a significant funding boost that will assure a strong child nutrition reauthorization bill in 2009. The child nutrition programs (WIC, school lunch and school breakfast, summer and afterschool food, and the child care food program that provides nutrition to children in Head Start, child care centers, family child care homes, and homeless and domestic violence shelters) are up for reauthorization in 2009. While they have flaws that need fixing and gaps that need filling, these programs, like SNAP/Food Stamps, fundamentally are miracles of good public policy. They not only reduce hunger, but they have a range of positive outcomes that advance other national priorities. They improve birth outcomes, boost child development, improve health, improve school achievement and student behavior, reduce obesity, boost family incomes, stimulate local economic growth, and improve the quality of child care and afterschool programs.

Significant additional investments in these proven effective programs are needed so that the reauthorization can both increase the number of children who participate in them, and improve the healthfulness of the food offered to children. Particular priority needs to be placed on increasing participation in school breakfast, summer food, child care food in family child care homes, and a supper program serving children when afterschool programs run into the late afternoon or evening. The goals of reducing hunger and reducing and preventing obesity are intertwined and both can be achieved with stronger child nutrition programs. FRAC’s testimony at a recent USDA hearing on these issues is attached.



3) Start investing to achieve the President-Elect's goal to eliminate childhood hunger. The President-Elect's economic recovery, anti-poverty and anti-hunger goals require a robust mixture of improved jobs and wages, improved income supports like refundable tax credits and more available unemployment insurance, and improved nutrition programs that will actually have the effect of eliminating childhood hunger. To reach the 2015 hunger goal requires first steps in 2009 and 2010, beyond the food stamp boost and child nutrition reauthorization discussed above.

Significantly improving the nutrition programs (beyond the stimulus boost and the reauthorization investments) is relatively inexpensive compared to many other recovery and anti-poverty initiatives and strategies to improve childhood and low-income services. More adequate food stamp benefits, elimination of arbitrary barriers to eligibility, and further improvements in child nutrition programs are needed to reach the 2015 goal. First steps could well be part of a broader package in the 2010 budget, such as a children's initiative and budget package or a working families initiative and budget package.

Politically, there is much support for making nutrition program improvements and attacking hunger:

- There are real opportunities for bipartisan action. Senator Lugar has been a longstanding positive force on food stamps, summer food and other issues. Numerous other Republicans both in the House and in the Senate have shared important leadership roles on anti-hunger program improvements. There is genuine enthusiasm on the Hill for these programs. The food stamps/nutrition title drove the recent Farm Bill, and the last Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization (in 2004) passed the House and Senate under unanimous consent.
- A substantial proportion of American adult voters say that they are worried about being able to put enough food on the table. Large majorities of Americans: classify hunger as a very important social issue; believe the U.S. government must make solving hunger a higher priority; say that a candidate's position on reducing hunger is important when deciding their vote; support food stamps and child nutrition programs; and want the federal government to invest more in anti-hunger programs. A summary by Peter Hart Research of the last several years of public opinion research on hunger and federal food programs can be found at [http://www.frac.org/pdf/hungerpoll08\\_summary.pdf](http://www.frac.org/pdf/hungerpoll08_summary.pdf).