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Food Insecurity in Iowa at Thanksgiving 1 in 9 Households Faces Uncertainty; Food Stamp Progress Stalled

MOUNT VERNON, Iowa (Nov. 21, 2007) — As all Iowans prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving, some face uncertainty about adequate food — and uncertainty about what Congress will do about it.

“It’s at best ironic that about the time a minority of senators have stalled important legislation to improve Food Stamps, we also find out that 1 in 9 Iowans face serious questions about putting food on the table for their families,” said David Osterberg, executive director of the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project.

“These are two disturbing trends: More families have hunger concerns, and the value of Food Stamps keeps eroding the longer we wait for a new Farm Bill,” Osterberg said. “While many are celebrating America’s abundance this Thanksgiving, we know many thousands in Iowa are not at the table — but could be.”

Both of Iowa’s U.S. senators, Tom Harkin and Chuck Grassley, supported moving ahead with the Food and Energy Security Act of 2007, commonly known as the Farm Bill. But a move to proceed with debate failed last Friday on a 55-42 vote — a minority of senators successfully blocking further work.

Also this month, the U.S. Department of Agriculture put out its new report on food security in the U.S. The new data demonstrate that, using a three-year average from 2004-06, the number of Iowa households experiencing food insecurity has risen to 11.4 percent — up from 9.5 percent from 2001-03 and 8 percent from 1996-98.

A closer look finds that “very low” food security in Iowa has risen by half — from 2.6 percent to 3.9 percent — over that period.

FOOD & ENERGY SECURITY ACT:

The nutrition section of the so-called Farm Bill reauthorizes the Food Stamp program to include \$3.2 billion in new investments and improvements in Food Stamp benefits, and The Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP, which benefits about 82,000 Iowans including seniors and people with disabilities.

FOOD STAMP FACTS FOR IOWA:

- About 225,000 needy Iowans receive assistance averaging \$1 per person per meal.
- About 53 percent of benefits go to households with children.
- About 15,000 Iowa Food Stamp households have an elderly person, and about 24,000 include someone with a disability.

A “food-insecure” household is defined by USDA as one that at times during the year is uncertain about or unable to get enough food to meet the needs of all in the household, due to inadequate resources.

Many in that population of food-insecure households can benefit from Food Stamps, which provide only about \$1 per meal per person. That benefit has steadily been eroded by inflation, cutting the purchasing power of those people — something the new farm bill would address.

Key nutrition elements of the Senate farm bill:

- **It prevents further erosion of benefits**, caused primarily by the freezing of the “standard deduction” used to compute benefits. Compared with 1995 a working parent with two kids has lost about \$24 a month in Food Stamp benefits. The new farm bill would partly rectify this loss by providing a typical family an additional \$4 per month in 2009, rising to \$8 in 2012. (75,000 Iowans would be helped.)
- **It raises the minimum benefit** from \$10 to \$16, helping primarily seniors and people with disabilities, and indexes it to inflation to keep buying power as food prices rise. About 7,000 Iowans currently receive these small allotments.
- **It helps to make work pay** by allowing families to deduct higher child-care costs in calculating their Food Stamp benefits. That amount is currently capped at \$200 per month for infants and \$175 for older children — far below what families typically pay for child care.

The Iowa Policy Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and policy analysis organization based in Mount Vernon. Reports are available on our websites:

<http://www.iowapolicyproject.org>

<<http://www.iowafiscal.org>>.

For more information about food security in the United States, visit these links on the U.S. Department of Agriculture website:

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/trends.htm>

<<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/>>

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