

## **NCLR Priorities to Strengthen the Food Stamp Program in the 2007 Farm Bill Reauthorization**

### **BACKGROUND**

According to the most recent data, nearly one in five (19.6%) Latinos experience food insecurity, or the inability to ensure an affordable and nutritious diet. Food insecurity can not only lead to hunger and malnourishment, but is also increasingly associated with the trends of rising obesity in the Latino community. Households with children undergo an especially hard time meeting the nutritional needs of their entire family. Hispanic households with children suffer from these threats at nearly twice the rate that non-Hispanic White households do (21.6% and 11.8%, respectively).

The societal consequences of food insecurity are great. Without adequate opportunity to improve the problem of food insecurity, this generation of Latinos, as well as the next, is in danger of developing serious and expensive associated health care problems that threaten their education attainment, workforce productivity, and economic achievement.

Despite high participation in the U.S. workforce (68.8%) – more than any other ethnic group, food insecurity persists in the Latino community. Latinos are more than twice as likely as their White counterparts to be among the working poor (10.5% and 4.9%, respectively), thus making it apparent that additional resources are needed to supplement the low income that is available in many of these households.

The U.S. has built a strong food assistance network, which has proved effective at reducing hunger and food insecurity within the United States. In fact, the Food Stamp Program, the largest food assistance program in the country was recently listed as one of the top successes of the government in the *National Journal*. Unfortunately, Latinos face various barriers hindering their access to these vital resources or most effective use of these benefits. The upcoming reauthorization of the Farm Bill, which includes the Nutrition Programs Title (Title IV) encompassing the Food Stamp Program, provides an important opportunity to simplify the program's complicated rules for immigrants, facilitate enrollment into the program, and fortify an already effective food assistance program.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

NCLR urges Congress to enact a Farm Bill with a strong nutrition title to improve the nutrition and well-being of the Latino community. The reauthorization of the Farm Bill should include the following priorities that will enhance the Food Stamp Program:

#### **Ensure Latino Access to and Enrollment in the Food Stamp Program**

##### *Restore Full Access to the Food Stamp Program for Legal Immigrants*

The Farm Bill should include a full repeal of Food Stamp restrictions currently faced by lawfully present immigrants. The 2002 Farm Bill ensured many more lawfully present immigrants were able to access the program and achieve greater food security than were able to due to the 1996

welfare reform. However, NCLR encourages Congress to build upon this success and restore access to the many immigrant households that remain ineligible for food stamps. Currently, legal immigrants who have resided in the United States for less than five years are not eligible for the Food Stamp Program. Many times these restrictions have also prevented eligible U.S.-born children in households with immigrant parents from seeking much needed resources, due to the confusion that results from these complex eligibility rules.

#### *Improve Outreach to Improve Enrollment of Eligible Latinos*

NCLR recommends the establishment of targeted community-based outreach and enrollment programs. Latinos' participation in the Food Stamp Program remains low as only half (52.5%) of Latinos eligible for the Program are receiving assistance through the program. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been involved in outreach efforts; however, confusion and fear related to eligibility, distrust, and unfamiliarity with government systems, language barriers, and lack of awareness all play a role in low participation. Latinos need to play a greater role at the community level ensuring that those eligible are connected to the program. A proven successful practice of disseminating health-related materials in the Latino community is the use of community health workers (*promotores de salud*), who often serve as a connector between Latinos and social service programs. Similar outreach and education practices of creating culturally- and linguistically-appropriate materials and programs for federal food assistance programs could be helpful in connecting eligible, food insecure families to essential resources from federal agencies. NCLR has requested approximately \$24 million over five years for such pilot programs from the White House and congressional leadership.

### **Ensure a Strong Food Stamp Program Structure**

#### *Food Stamps Ensured to Reach All Those in Need*

NCLR opposes any changes to the program that would limit the ability of need-eligible families to access the program. Food stamps have been very successful in alleviating food insecurity as they are able to adjust – expanding and contracting – to ensure those in need can readily access food. The Food Stamp Program should continue to maintain an entitlement structure so that all those eligible based on their income and assets have access to the program.

#### *Reevaluate and Increase the Food Stamp Benefit*

Rather than using the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), a plan that was created for short-term food shortages, as the approximate designation for the *maximum* benefit for participants, the TFP should be the *minimum* benefit provided to participants in order to ensure their ability to have a complete and nutritious diet. The Food Stamp Program does an exceptional job of defending against hunger and food insecurity; however, the resources provided through the average benefit will not ensure a fully nutritious and complete diet. Currently, the average participant receives approximately one dollar per meal. Without an increase in the food stamp benefits, many of the poorest families will continue to find themselves cutting corners, often sacrificing quality food and nutritional content to stave off hunger.

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