



HB 613 WOULD INCREASE PARTICIPATION IN THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM AND REDUCE THE WORKLOAD OF ELIGIBILITY STAFF

The House Human Services Committee will hear HB 613 on Thursday, April 9. The bill would increase participation in the Food Stamp Program and improve the performance of the eligibility system by simplifying the Food Stamp enrollment process. HB 613 directs the Health and Human Services Commission to exercise the option in federal law to lengthen certification periods for Food Stamp recipients and reduce unnecessary interview requirements. This Policy Page explains the options available to states to simplify Food Stamp enrollment and summarizes the arguments for adopting these changes to Food Stamp policy in Texas.

- **The House Human Services Committee will hear HB 613 on Thursday, April 9, at 10:30 a.m. or upon adjournment of the House, in E. 2.036.**
- **HB 613 would increase Food Stamp participation by simplifying the enrollment process.**
- **HB 613 would reduce the Food Stamp workload for eligibility staff, which would increase timeliness and accuracy in application processing for all benefits.**
- **Food Stamps are 100 percent federally funded. Increasing participation in the Food Stamp Program during an economic recession helps needy families make ends meet and boosts the state and local economies.**

The Need for Food Stamps is Increasing

Even before the current economic crisis, almost one-in-four Texas children lived in poor families, and one in every seven families (14.8 percent) was at risk for hunger, the third-highest rate of food insecurity in the nation. As unemployment rises, more Texans will turn to the Food Stamp Program for help. The Food Stamp Program is specifically designed to help families get through tough economic times by helping them bridge the gap between their earnings and expenses during periods of un- or underemployment.

Texas needs an eligibility system that is capable of meeting this increase in need. HB 613 would strengthen our eligibility system's ability to meet this need by reducing workload for staff. At the same time, it would help needy families stay connected to the Food Stamp Program by simplifying the recertification process.

Simplifying the Food Stamp Enrollment Process

Under HHSC's current policy, most households on Food Stamps are certified for six months at a time and are required to have either an in-person or telephone interview to renew their benefits. This is a time-consuming process for clients and labor-intensive for caseworkers. However, under federal law, states have the option to certify most households for 12 months and require recipients to submit a semi-annual report at the 6-month mark. This report enables the state to check for changes in the household's circumstances and make any necessary changes to their benefits.

A 12-month certification period with a semi-annual report has benefits for both needy families and the state. It can increase food stamp participation

among households while at the same time lowering state error rates and exposure to sanctions from the federal government.

With a semi-annual report, the state is only required to ask about changes in the household's circumstances in a few areas, including income, household composition, residence, vehicles, assets, or a change in child support obligations. This is less burdensome for a household than a full reapplication, which covers all eligibility rules. It also reduces the state's liability, because states are only accountable for errors made in changes in the items included on the report form. At the 12-month renewal point, households must complete a full reapplication.

Congress enacted these changes to the Food Stamp enrollment process specifically to increase Food Stamp

participation among eligible families, simplify administration of the program for caseworkers, and reduce states' exposure to fiscal sanctions.

As of November 2007, USDA reported that 13 states were using a 12-month certification with a semi-annual report. However, the 2008 Farm Bill expanded the option to cover all Food Stamp households and therefore more states may have exercised the option since then.

HB 613 would authorize HHSC to take advantage of the options in federal law to lengthen certification periods and reduce interview requirements. This will increase Food Stamp participation, lower workload, and reduce error rates.

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