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## Anti-Hunger Bills in the 76<sup>th</sup> Legislature

Food Assistance for Legal immigrants

Funding to Expand the Summer Food Service Program

Nutrition Education and Outreach

Opportunities to address childhood hunger and ensure nutrition assistance for needy families and communities

The multi-billion dollar budget surplus projected for the 2000-01 biennium presents a rare opportunity for the 76<sup>th</sup> Legislature to make sound investments that reduce hunger and provide families with the nutrition assistance they need to become self-sufficient. Several nutrition-related bills have been introduced this session that address hunger in the immigrant community; children's access to nutritious meals during the summer; and the unwarranted decline in Food Stamp participation resulting from state and federal welfare reforms.

These bills represent sound investments that not only improve the quality of life for many Texans, but also lessen the burden hunger and malnutrition places on communities across the state. Since hunger issues rarely top the agenda of most elected officials in Texas – despite evidence of widespread childhood hunger and a 17% poverty rate – your active support for these bills is extremely important. It is

often only through contacts with constituents that our legislators are able to understand what it means to be hungry or poor, and what they can do to address these problems.

### HB 2702 – Nutrition assistance for legal immigrants cut off from Food Stamps

Most legal immigrants in Texas are ineligible for the Food Stamp program as a result of federal welfare reform – the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, or PRWORA. (See Policy Page #68 for background on immigrants' eligibility for Food Stamps). Despite a partial federal restoration of benefits this past summer to certain seniors, children, and persons with disabilities, many vulnerable legal immigrants remain ineligible for federal food assistance.

☆ **H.B. 2702:** Introduced by Representative Chavez (D-El Paso), this bill expands the State Immigrant Food Assistance Program (SIFAP) to provide benefits to the following populations of legal immigrants who are ineligible for federal Food Stamps due to changes enacted under PRWORA :

- Legal immigrants age 60 or older who arrived in the U.S. on or before 8/22/96 (enactment of PRWORA);
- Children under 18 who arrive(d) in the U.S. after 8/22/96; and
- Persons with disabilities who arrive(d) in the U.S. after 8/22/96.

It is estimated that HB 2702 would cover roughly 1,300 children, 5,300 seniors, and 1,700 immigrants with disabilities. Similar legislation is expected to be introduced in the Senate.

**Hunger in the immigrant community.** This bill is an important step toward addressing the rise in hunger and malnutrition observed among legal immigrants in Texas as a result of the Food Stamp cuts. A survey conducted by Physicians' for Human Rights among immigrants at community centers and hospitals in Texas, Illinois, and California showed that the prevalence of hunger among this population is seven to 10 times greater than for families who

have not lost their Food Stamp benefits.<sup>1</sup> Other studies done in states with large immigrant populations have produced similar findings. These surveys also found that children who did not lose their benefits were also suffering increased hunger, when their household's overall Food Stamp benefit was cut or reduced because of an ineligible legal immigrant

<sup>1</sup> Physicians for Human Rights Study of Food Insecurity and Hunger Among Legal Immigrants in Texas, California, and Illinois, March 1998.

family member. Data from the Department of Human Services show that there over 153,000 children in Texas who live in "mixed households," where one legal immigrant parent has lost their Food Stamp benefits. The majority of these children are U.S. citizens.

**Governor is not expected to support this legislation.**

Despite a pledge last year that Texas would reach out to those legal immigrants "least able to help themselves," Governor Bush does not support legislation at the state level to further restore Food Stamp benefits to legal immigrants. In March 1998, the Governor designated \$18 million from DHS' budget to establish the State Immigrant Food Assistance Program (SIFAP) to cover roughly 15,000 elderly and disabled legal immigrant seniors who were unfairly penalized under PRWORA. With the exception of 327 seniors, most SIFAP recipients were eligible again for federal benefits when the restorations went into effect this fall. Although SIFAP will continue for this small group into the 2000-01 biennium, the roughly \$11 million in remaining funds have not been reallocated to cover other vulnerable legal immigrants.

According to his policy staff, the governor's position is that Food Stamps are a federal responsibility and, since Congress is expected to enact another partial restoration this

year to cover more elderly legal immigrants, Texas should adopt a "wait-and-see" attitude. Seventeen other states currently provide replacement food assistance to legal immigrants ineligible for Food Stamps under PRWORA. By enacting HB 2702, Texas would join these other states in sending an important message to Congress that Food Stamps for this population are a priority.

**SB 800 – Expand the Summer Food Service Program:**

The Summer Food Service Program is a federally-funded program that reimburses eligible organizations for serving nutritious meals to low-income children during the summer. Program sponsors include schools, camps, local governments, National Youth Sports Programs, and non-profits. Evaluations show that the Summer Food Service Program can provide at least one-third of low-income children's nutritional needs at lunch time. Although over 1.5 million low-income children eat lunch during the school year through the National School Lunch Program, only 13% of these children ate meals through the Summer Food Service Program last summer. Many of these children don't have a replacement for these meals during the summer, unless a summer feeding site is available in their neighborhood.

☆ **S.B. 800** – Introduced by Senator Ellis (D-Houston), this bill requires DHS to conduct targeted outreach and offer a financial supplement to encourage eligible organizations to sponsor summer feeding sites through the Summer Food Service Program. By increasing the number of feeding sites in underserved areas, SB 800 will ensure that more low-income children eat healthy, nutritious meals during the summer.

**Growth is down in the Summer Food Service Program due to cuts in funding under welfare reform.**

The federal welfare act in 1996 cut the reimbursement rate for meals served under the Summer Food Service Program. This has made it more difficult for sponsors to participate in the program, and many have responded by cutting the number of feeding sites they operate. Since growth in the Summer Food Service Program is best measured by the number of meals served over the course of a summer, a good way to judge how well the program is serving the eligible population is to look at growth in number of meals served. Although the Summer Food Service Program grew significantly during the early 1990s, growth has slowed considerably since 1995. The program grew by 34% in just one year from 1994 to 1995, compared with only 7% growth over the next three years from 1995 to 1998. One of the reasons for this slow growth is that although the number of school districts participating in the program has grown steadily since 1993 (when schools in low-income areas were mandated to participate), the number of non-school sponsors has declined by 30% since 1995. Since non-school sponsors are responsible for the majority of meals served in July and August, many children do not have access to nutritious meals during the second half of the summer.

**Other states have expanded their summer food programs by investing in outreach and financial supplements.**

In 1998, four states conducted targeted outreach for the Summer Food Service Program and supplemented the federal meal reimbursement rate with their own funds. Last summer, 40% of the national growth in the program occurred in these four states.

**Funding for Nutrition Education and Outreach**

In 1993, members of the Texas Anti-Hunger Network worked hard to pass SB 714, an anti-hunger bill. Although SB 714 authorized DHS to develop and implement a Food Stamp education and outreach program, the Legislature has never appropriated any funds for this purpose. This session, the Center has proposed a budget rider to Article II of HB1/SB2 (the appropriations bill for the FY 2000-01 biennium) which would provide up to \$2 million for DHS to conduct nutrition education and outreach to needy Texans eligible for federal food assistance. The House Appropriations Committee has included this rider in its mark-up of the appropriations bill. The next step is to ensure

that the Senate Finance Committee includes this funding in their version of the bill.

Federal nutrition programs form a critical part of the defense against hunger and poor nutrition for needy Texans, yet many of these programs are underutilized. Food Stamp enrollment has declined by 41% over the last three years, despite only a small reduction in the number of people in poverty, and DHS predicts that it will serve only 35% of the eligible Food Stamp population in 2000.

### **Reasons for low participation rates in the Food Stamp program.**

One of the reasons that outreach for the federal nutrition programs has never been formally conducted is that many members of the Legislature (and agency officials) are ideologically opposed to the idea that the state should actively “recruit” low-income Texans for Food Stamps. Unfortunately, many individuals and families at risk of hunger do not realize that they are eligible for Food Stamps, or don’t want to get benefits because of the stigma associated with public assistance. For others, in particular elderly and rural populations, difficulty getting to a local Food Stamp office to apply for benefits is often a barrier to participation. Regardless of the reason, Food Stamps are too important a

defense against hunger to ignore such low participation rates. Further, because Food Stamps are 100% federally funded, the state is not taking advantage of billions of dollars in federal money that could stimulate the Texas economy.

### **Why Texas should conduct nutrition education and outreach.**

There are numerous arguments why the state should commit to increasing participation in the Food Stamp and child nutrition programs. The link between malnutrition and increased health problems is an obvious one: ensuring that low-income children have access to the federal nutrition programs will improve educational achievement, reduce the need for special education, and lower the health costs associated with nutrition-related health problems. Another argument that is particularly relevant right now is that, for many families, Food Stamp benefits are critical to getting off welfare and keeping a job, or helping families to escape poverty. According to *Texas Works*, DHS’ welfare-to-work initiative, the measure of success is self-sufficiency – not just the number of people who are moved off cash assistance, but the number who find and retain employment. Ensuring that working families get the nutritional assistance for which they are eligible is critical to helping these families achieve independence.

### **Hunger may be on the rise.**

- In a recent survey of America’s families by the Urban Institute, 60% of Texas children in low-income families reported that they worried about getting enough to eat, a significantly higher rate than the nation as a whole.<sup>2</sup>
- Reports from emergency feeding centers across the state document a growing level of need among hungry Texans and, despite increasing donations, an inability to keep up with the demand for food. In 1997, the Texas Association of Second Harvest Food Banks distributed over 104 million pounds of food, up from 87 million pounds distributed in 1996.
- It is estimated that food banks in Texas will have to distribute over 2 billion pounds of food in 2000 to keep up with the growing demand for food assistance.
- Programs that used to provide “emergency” food aid are now becoming outlets for year-round assistance for low-income families. Some food banks report as high as a 20% increase in need for 1998.

### *Actions Needed.*

- Contact your senator and representative and ask them to support these important initiatives to address hunger and help families achieve independence from welfare. Urge them to sign on to HB 2702 and SB 800 (or their companion bills in the other chamber) and encourage their colleagues to do the same.
- To find out who your legislators are and how to contact them, call (512) 463-1252
- It is also important to contact members of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance committees, who will make the decisions whether to fund these initiatives.

- For a list of these committee members, check out: [www.capitol.state.tx.us/tlo/cmte.htm](http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/tlo/cmte.htm)

For more information about these bills, please visit our web site at [www.cppp.org](http://www.cppp.org).

For talking points on HB 2702 and SB 800, go to: [www.cppp.org/products/policyanalysis/index.html](http://www.cppp.org/products/policyanalysis/index.html).

*For more information, please contact Celia Hagert at (512) 320-0222.*

<sup>2</sup>“ Snapshots of America’s Families: A View of the Nation, and 13 States from the National Survey of America’s Families,” the Urban Institute, January 1999.