

## JANUARY 2015

While the recession may be over, the number of Americans still struggling with this basic need remains unchanged. Hunger is a symptom of lack of resources. **Unemployment, low wages, and high housing costs have been identified as the major causes of hunger.** The problem of hunger here is compounded given New Jersey's high cost of living, which makes far too many of those struggling with food insecurity ineligible for federal nutritional assistance.<sup>i</sup> In addition, cuts to the benefit level of those already receiving assistance further threaten thousands of New Jersey households. Summary of important legislation that would impact food insecurity follows.

### **STRENGTHEN AND SUPPORT FEDERAL PROGRAMS AND INCREASE STATE ACCESS TO THESE PROGRAMS**

#### **SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Food Stamps)**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly food stamp) helps millions of people put food on the table every month. The program provides monthly benefits to eligible low-income families, which can be used to purchase food. Almost 900,000 New Jerseyans rely on SNAP to help meet their nutritional needs.

**Federally**, this program is often the target of budget cuts. In the past, Feeding America had estimated cuts to be equal to all the charitable food distributed annual. Improving benefits (not cutting benefits) should be advocated. The Benefits are calculated using the antiquated "thrifty food plan" that is increasingly becoming inadequate to meet the cost of a healthy diet. In addition to the general benefit level inadequacy, in recent years these benefits have been eroded by overall cuts to the program even as the cost of food rises. Improved benefit allotments, using the low-cost food plan as a guide, would positively impact the health and nutrition of millions of Americans, and would reduce long-term health costs.

Although **New Jersey** has taken steps to expand eligibility for SNAP and streamline the application process, only about 67% of those eligible actually participate in the program. New Jersey lags considerably behind the National average of 75% of eligible people accessing SNAP benefits.<sup>ii</sup> Pending bills would address processing delays, incentivize additional staffing and assist clients to track their process (**Assembly Bills A3825, AR175, A3963**). Ongoing efforts also focus on applying for available waivers and instituting SNAP procedures that would ensure documentation of household expenses.

#### **Improved Child Nutrition Programs**

Child Nutrition Programs will be federally reauthorized in 2015. Expect legislation to improve school and summer meal programs as well as the Women Infants and Children Program (WIC).

#### **Child Nutrition Reauthorization Policy Recommendations**

- Strengthen States' Ability to Reach Kids During the Summer and weekends
- Streamline Regulations for Community Based Providers
- Leverage Schools Beyond the School Day

- Strengthen Access and Quality in School Meal Programs and WIC

Sadly in **New Jersey** these programs are seriously under-utilized. The school breakfast program, for instance, provides free or reduced-price breakfasts for children in need. It has a proven track record of enhancing academic performance, improving child health and reducing disruptive classroom behavior. Despite the progress made in recent years, of the 519,000 New Jersey students eligible for school breakfast, only 41% received it leaving 308,000 children unserved and millions of dollars in federal funds on the table.<sup>iii</sup>

Advocates support the expansion of School Breakfast both fiscally and administratively. By investing state funds to reinstate supplemental funding of the program New Jersey can provide fiscal incentives to districts to adopt a “breakfast after the bell” approach to school breakfast. Legislation has been introduced to improve school breakfast (**A4030** Establishes "breakfast after the bell" incentive fund of .10 cents per meal and **A3889** which establishes school breakfast kiosk pilot program). For further information on particular utilization your school district visit Advocates for Children in New Jersey <http://acnj.org/school-breakfast/>

## **ANTI-POVERTY NETWORK OF NEW JERSEY**

The Anti-Poverty Network (APN) is a network of diverse partners whose mission is to empower the membership and develop unified efforts to fight poverty in all its forms. We believe that in order to reach this goal it is necessary to increase the opportunities and reduce the daily challenges for people living in poverty, and to promote a more equitable and effective social system that builds the common good. APN's primary strategies for accomplishing the prevention, reduction, and end of poverty are through information-sharing, community-education, partnership-building, providing a framework for public discourse on the causes, effects, and remedies of poverty and advocating for policies and programs that prevent, reduce, and end poverty.

Economic Empowerment - New Jersey now has the highest percent of long term unemployed among all states.<sup>2</sup> While the unemployment rate has gone down, it is still above the national average and the decrease is due in large part a shift to low-wage jobs. Work in this area includes policies that increase wages and expand programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Housing - Nearly a quarter of the state's renters paying over 50% of their income to housing, it should come as no surprise that many families often have to make difficult choices between rent, food, medicine, and other essentials. Below are recommendations on the ways in which the current situation can be remedied. Work in the area includes increasing and expanding the “NJ Housing Trust Fund” and ensuring that locally collected funds for housing are spent addressing local housing needs. This includes funding the State Rental Assistance Program from the State Budget and not from sources crucial to providing affordable housing.

For more information, visit: <http://www.antipovertynetwork.org/>

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<sup>i</sup> Feeding America. 2014. “Map the Meal Gap 2014: Food Insecurity Estimates at the County Level,” <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap.aspx>.

<sup>ii</sup> See, USDA Food and Nutrition Service Mid-Atlantic Region Office Fiscal Year 2013, Spotlight on New Jersey.

<sup>iii</sup> Advocates for Children in New Jersey. 2014. “Food For Thought: 4<sup>th</sup> Annual School Breakfast Report,” [http://acnj.org/downloads/2014\\_10\\_07\\_School\\_Breakfast\\_Report.pdf](http://acnj.org/downloads/2014_10_07_School_Breakfast_Report.pdf)