

Press Release
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Contacts:
Hope Coulter, 374-6675

Arkansas Releases Food Stamp Report, Calls on Arkansas's Members of Congress to Protect Threatened Food Stamp Program

(Little Rock, AR) Today the Arkansas Hunger Coalition and Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families released a new report, "Food Stamps: Supporting Healthy Families and Communities in Arkansas," and called on Members of Arkansas's congressional delegation to protect the Food Stamp Program from up to \$3 billion in federal budget cuts and threats to the basic structure of the program. The report highlights the crucial link between access to food stamps and the ability to feed a family while working at minimum wage.

More than 25 million people, including 372,916 in Arkansas, depend on food stamps each month to help feed their children and make ends meet.

"Federal food stamp benefit cuts could be devastating to Arkansas families," said Hope Coulter, executive director of the Arkansas Hunger Coalition. "There seems to be a perception that states or charities will pick up the slack from any federal program cuts. But our state budget is already tight, and charities have only so much capacity. We urge Congress to do the right thing and vote against any budget cuts that take food away from the children and families who are least able to protect themselves."

As part of this year's federal budget agreement, the Senate and House Agriculture Committees must cut \$3 billion over five years in programs under their jurisdiction, which includes food stamps, agricultural subsidies, and conservation programs. The decision on how these cuts will be made by the Senate and House Agriculture Committees is expected no later than September 16, 2005. The basic structure of the Food Stamp Program is also threatened by two provisions of the House Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Reauthorization Bill.

"Here at Arkansas Rice Depot, we do our best to provide hungry families in our community with the food they need to get by," said Laura Rhea, president of the Arkansas Rice Depot. "But emergency food is intended only to *supplement* the Food Stamp Program—we don't have the capacity to take care of all of the families who currently benefit from food stamps."

Phyllis Haynes, president of the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, agreed. "Without strong food stamp funding more children will go without, because community resources alone are not enough to fill the need."

The take-home pay for a family of four, with one parent working full-time at minimum wage, places the household at just under half of the federal poverty line.

"So many low-income parents are working hard, but after paying the rent and utilities each month, there's not much left for a family living on minimum wage," said Coulter. "As increasing numbers of working families in Arkansas are unable to afford basic necessities, the Food Stamp Program makes it possible for them to put food on the table."

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Union Station, Suite 306 • 1400 West Markham • Little Rock, AR 72201
(501) 371-9678 • (501) 371-9681 Fax • www.aradvocates.org

Some Members of Congress have attempted to justify funding cuts by claiming the Food Stamp Program is inefficient and subject to abuse. Studies have shown that the exact opposite is true. More than 98 percent of benefits go to eligible families, with the error rate at an all-time low.

Currently, the average food stamp benefit in Arkansas is 93 cents per person per meal. A family of three receives approximately \$250/month in food stamps.

“Hundreds of thousands of working families could lose food stamp benefits if Congress moves forward with these cuts,” said Coulter. “This modest amount is crucial to financially pressed families.”

The Food Stamp Program serves a range of low-income people, including families with children, elderly, and people with disabilities. Approximately 80 percent of recipients live in households with children, while 31 percent live in households with an elderly or disabled household member.

The Arkansas Hunger Coalition is working to end hunger in Arkansas through public education, advocacy, and support of individual food agencies.

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