

## On the Occasion of the AAFSD 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference

As I sat at my desk trying to compose this welcome to the conference, I knew it could not just begin with the typical welcome and thanks. Just a few short weeks ago our country was attacked, something my parents had experienced, but I had not. I cannot even begin to sum up the emotions I have been feeling: Great sadness for the innocent people who were killed and their families, great admiration for all those who have worked the rescue and recovery operation and a kind of numbness at the enormity of the crime.

One thing that has helped me to start to get back to normal is the fact that the programs I work with are so essential to the well being of the citizens of my state and the nation. We are here to share information and ideas about one of those essential programs, the Food Stamp Program. Now, as it has done for 30 years, the food stamp program will be a safety net for the nation. In the face of economic uncertainty, we know that the program we administer will help cushion the blow for individuals and families.

As we come together this year, the picture for reauthorization of the program has drastically changed. The budget surplus that we believed might be shared with the program to achieve simplification has all but disappeared. However, we will not abandon our ideas. We will continue to work to implement as many of them as possible, because streamlining is even more necessary in the face of rising need.

I believe our general sessions and workshops offer a good balance of topics covering the major program issues from reauthorization to customer service to payment accuracy. The AAFSD Board worked hard putting together this informative and timely agenda.

Our host-state committee, Gary Swanson, Sonya Hunter and Linda Joerden, has done a great job of handling the local logistics, providing staff to produce the daily newsletter, and volunteers to ensure a successful conference. Please take time to thank the California staff for their outstanding effort to support us.

I can't neglect our federal partners. FNS is participating in workshops and the town hall we will have on Wednesday afternoon. Eric Bost, the new Undersecretary for Food Nutrition and Consumer Services will speak with us on Tuesday afternoon about his vision for the program. We all appreciate a chance to hear the federal perspective and work together to improve the program. We also appreciate the participation of ACF and CMS representatives, and their recognition that people frequently participate in TANF and Medicaid as well as the food stamp program.

Some other important participants in the conference include representatives from the advocacy community, nutrition education and special outreach projects.

Our exhibitors bring private sector support to the program and conference. They provide us information on tools and techniques that can improve program administration and benefit delivery. In addition, sponsor support helps us provide you with a quality conference experience. Special thanks to our Emerald sponsor – eFunds Government Services, Amethyst sponsors – Affiliated Computer Services, Inc., Data Card Group and GovConnect, Inc. and general sponsors – Data Builders and DCS Information Services. CitiCorp Services, Inc. has also provided generous support for many years.

This year's conference is not just a learning opportunity to me. This year, more than ever, it is a chance to connect with my Food Stamp "family" and tell you how special you all are to me. I have never associated with a nicer, more caring group of people. Thank you for being here.