

REAUTHORIZATION

General Session

Panel: Larry Goolsby, Senior Policy Analyst, APHSA (Moderator); Bonny O'Neil, Associate Deputy Food Stamp Program Administrator, FNS; Ellen Vollinger, Legal Director, FRAC; David Super, General Counsel, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

Larry Goolsby set the stage for discussing the status of Food Stamp reauthorization by indicating that there was good news regarding legislation. A number of the provisions in the Senator Lugar Bill (S. 1571) were aligned with the recommendations outlined in APHSA's Crossroads document, which addresses programs coming up for reauthorization. It was noted that the positive aspects of the Bill were a direct result of the years of hard work by a variety of concerned stakeholders. The main priority is to truly simplify the program. A lot of how the Food Stamp legislation turns out will be dependent on farm-related issues. Working with local advocate groups can provide an extremely valuable "grassroots" perspective.

Why reauthorize now when the Program does not have to be reauthorized until October of 2002? This year's Budget Resolution provided approximately \$73 billion in farm aid over the next ten years. Next year's Resolution will be less generous. Bonnie O'Neil indicated that the Administration was "neutralized" by the House of Representative's lightning speed during the initial Farm Bill development and was not a major player until the Bill came up for vote in the House. At that time, the Administration opposed the farm support funding as excessive. The House approved Farm Bill "raises the bar" according to David Super regarding quality control reform and gives a "slight nod" to simplification and significantly, would impose no program cuts.

The Lugar Bill is the "centerpiece" legislation for reauthorization according to Ellen Vollinger. The Bill sets aside a substantial amount of money for the Food Stamp Program. However, David Super displayed previous years budget charts that graphically backed his comment: "you could use the entire \$73 billion currently indicated in the Farm Bill over the next 10 years and the Program would just be treading water given the cuts made in 1996!". While the panel members voiced their approval of the effort of the Bill, there was also agreement that additional improvements could be made such as in the areas of simplification and immigrants. It is important that there be a bi-partisan effort focused on a common goal of overall improvement. "Don't lose the forest for the trees!" exclaimed Ellen. Bonnie O'Neil stated that very tough sledding lies ahead for passage of the bill, but even if it isn't passed this year, a lot of ground work has been done and puts the program in an improved starting position next year.

The general session then broke into different workshops one of which was an extension of the General Session theme. The panel members were David Super, Julie Paradis, Washington D.C. Counsel, America's Second Harvest, and Ellen Vollinger.

Julie spoke about concrete ways in which CBO's and government agencies can achieve a common goal of making the FS program accessible and efficient for our clients. She also spoke about how America's Second Harvest organization has advocated for program simplification, full restoration of benefits to immigrants, QC reform and made a plea for government agencies to closely work with regional food banks. Americas Second Harvest's website is www.secondharvest.org.

Ellen's emphasis focused on efforts in working together to change legislation. Her organization advocates for changed vehicle resource limits, change in ABAWD time limits, maximizing benefits for eligible HH members, utility and shelter deduction change, transitional benefits, change to reporting requirements. The website address for Food Research and Action Center is www.frac.org.

David Super talked about improving participation, expansion of eligibility and benefit level, helping people to reduce the dollar amount spent on food and helping staff answer questions consistently. The Center on Budget and Policy Priority's website address is www.cbpp.org.