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CONGRESS CAN STRENGTHEN THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM California Representatives Will Play Key Role When Congress Considers Farm Bill

SACRAMENTO – The Food Stamp Program is one of the most important issues Congress will address when they take up the Farm Bill in upcoming weeks. Two million Californians, primarily families with children, rely on food stamps for nutritional assistance. Unfortunately, food stamp benefits have not kept pace with the cost of living, and are worth on average just \$1.09 per person per meal.

A new California Budget Project report, “Congress Can Strengthen the Food Stamp Program” recommends that Congress consider changes to stop the erosion in the purchasing power of food stamp benefits. With several California representatives on the House Committee on Agriculture – Reps. Joe Baca, Dennis Cardoza, Jim Costa, and Kevin McCarthy – Californians are expected to play a key role in the future of the Food Stamp Program this year.

“Every year, families can buy less and less with their food stamps,” said Scott Graves, author of the report and a senior policy analyst at the California Budget Project, a nonpartisan public policy research group. “Boosting food stamp benefits would make a significant difference in the lives of many Californians, helping them purchase not only more food, but also healthier foods such as fruits and vegetables, which tend to cost more.”

The report recommends that Congress could:

- **Increase the amount of deductions for certain living expenses, a key component for calculating benefits.** Households subtract living expenses, such as utilities, from their monthly income to determine their food stamp benefit amount. Since 1996, this “standard deduction” has been frozen at \$134 per month for households with three or fewer people. To reflect changes in the cost of living, Congress could increase this deduction to \$188, and continue adjusting it for inflation beginning in 2008.
- **Allow families to deduct all child care expenses.** The Food Stamp Program allows families to subtract child care expenses of up to \$200 per month per child from their income. This deduction has never been adjusted for inflation and does not reflect the impact of rising child care costs on the budgets of low-income families.

The Food Stamp Program has helped make severe hunger rare in California and the US. However, more than one in 10 Californians – 4.2 million people, including 1.6 million children – live in households that experience hunger or the threat of hunger.

This report is available at www.cbj.org.

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