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The FACTS about:
“Heat and Eat” and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in Massachusetts

Congress is proposing major cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called food stamps) at a time when the Massachusetts SNAP caseload continues to grow due to the slowed economic recovery. Massachusetts anti-hunger advocates are concerned about proposed changes to the program that would have a direct and significant impact on many state residents who rely on nutrition assistance benefits to feed their families.

SNAP is the number one defense against hunger in America and is a vital lifeline for nearly 900,000 low income Massachusetts residents participating in over 450,000 SNAP eligible households.

1. What is the “heat and eat” option?

For many households, limited income results in tough choices between “heating or eating.” For families with young children, seniors and persons with disabilities, adequate nutrition may be jeopardized because limited funds must go to keeping a roof over their heads and the lights on.

Congress granted states the flexibility to assist families with heating or cooling costs by providing a Standard Utility Adjustment (SUA), particularly important to areas of Massachusetts with severe winters and for seniors and persons with disabilities who need air conditioning in hot summer months. In 2007, the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) expanded the number of households able to receive this SUA by implementing a “heat and eat” $1 benefit from the LIHEAP energy assistance program. Coined “H-EAT”, this special LIHEAP benefit simplifies the benefit calculation and verifications needed for these households and significantly increases their SNAP monthly benefits.

2. What is the proposed change to this option?

The Farm Bill approved by the Senate Agriculture Committee in April 2012 includes a $4.5 billion over ten years cut to SNAP created by increasing the threshold amount of LIHEAP needed to trigger the SUA to $10. The House Budget proposes elimination of the “heat and eat” SNAP option. Both proposed changes would place the “heat and eat” option out of reach of states like Massachusetts who are experiencing reductions in LIHEAP funding.

3. What is the impact of the proposed change to “heat and eat” on hungry families in Massachusetts?

The change to the H-EAT option is not simply a technical change. It is a change that would reduce SNAP benefits for approximately 120,000 Massachusetts SNAP households by an average of $70 per household per month.

DTA projects that of the SNAP households harmed by this cut, 80% are seniors or persons with disabilities (including disabled parents and disabled children). DTA data shows that over 35% of the SNAP households harmed include young children.

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The impact of the H-EAT cut is particularly grave for households with elder and disabled members due to the SNAP “math” - for multiple reasons:

- In calculating countable income, SNAP rules allow households to deduct a portion of shelter costs that exceed 50% of net income (rent or home ownership plus utilities). Households with elder or disabled members may claim the full shelter costs that exceed 50% of net income. Households without elder/disabled members get a capped shelter deduction, regardless of the amount of shelter costs.

- H-EAT has been critical to offset other basic living expenses incurred by elders and persons with disabilities. MA, like many states, has increased Medicaid co-pays and shifted medical costs out of Medicaid (such as dental and vision care). Less than 15% of elder/disabled SNAP households claim out-of-pocket medical expenses that could otherwise increase SNAP.

- SNAP households with seniors and persons with disabilities routinely have the most difficult time with understanding the complex SNAP deductions and securing verifications.

4. What is the fiscal impact on Massachusetts local communities from the proposed change to “heat and eat”? 

The H-EAT option has resulted in increased benefits for 30% of our SNAP caseload, resulting in an additional $100M in federal benefits spent in Massachusetts grocery stores. With a total of $9 of economic activity per each $5 of benefits spent, the “heat and eat” option has triggered over $180M in economic activity in the Commonwealth.

5. What is the impact of the proposed change on DTA?

Implementing the H-EAT option has helped streamlined administration of SNAP and reduced the need for DTA staff to collect detailed client information on utility expenses. Between 2005 and 2012, DTA lost 30% of its SNAP workforce while the SNAP caseload has increased by over 300%. Implementing H-EAT as well as other options to streamline SNAP administration allows DTA to continue to provide timely benefits to eligible and hungry Massachusetts families.

We urge the US Congress to strongly support retention of the “heat and eat” option in the SNAP program in the 2012 Farm Bill.

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