

# Healthy Eating in the 2008 State Legislative Session

California is considered a leader when it comes to nutrition. With a dismal fiscal outlook facing the Governor and the legislature, the real test of this leadership will come in the 2008 State Legislative Session. In these tight budget times, the legislature will be challenged to maintain current investments in nutrition, to seek innovative ways of bringing in federal food resources and to invest in preventive-health efforts to reduce the costly consequences of poor nutrition. California Food Policy Advocates is proposing a number of initiatives to help the state address these challenges.

## 1. Preserving Current Nutrition Investments in the Budget

The Legislative Analyst's Office believes that the legislature will have to "adopt \$10 billion in solutions" to balance the 2008-09 State Budget. The legislature and the Governor will have to increase revenue or make significant cuts. This financial pressure makes all areas of the budget – including nutrition – vulnerable. CFPA would like to steer the legislature away from time-honored targets (cutting low-income programs) and toward programmatic efficiencies and revenue generators.



**PROTECT CASH-AID PROGRAMS** Cash assistance programs like CalWORKS and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) – funds essential for even adequate nutrition-- have historically been targeted for cuts - even in better budget times. The Governor and the legislature must not jeopardize the health of children, seniors or the disabled by making cuts to cash-aid programs.

**SEEK PROGRAM EFFICIENCIES** Over the years, nutrition programs like food stamps have become burdened by costly paperwork and application hassles not required and not found in other states. CFPA has identified millions of dollars in savings from removing this red tape. We recognize that the legislature seeks billion-dollar solutions, but we believe every penny of savings helps to avoid cuts.

**Support Revenue Generators** CFPA believes that increased state revenue must be among the \$10 billion in "solutions" considered by the legislature; otherwise deep cuts could jeopardize the health of low-income Californians.

### **Protect Recent New Investments in Nutrition**

Over the last decade, California has made modest, but important investments in better nutrition. From several major food stamp improvements adopted in 2003 to increased reimbursement for school meals adopted in 2007, preventive nutrition investments have been a priority. Given the tremendous benefits of these investments, they should not be rolled back. The 2007-08 budget already took a turn in the wrong direction by eliminating the California Fresh Start Program (see below). We need to restart Fresh Start, and we can't allow other nutrition programs to wither.

## 2. Improving School Nutrition

2008 may or may not be the year of "education reform." Regardless, it is clear that good nutrition in schools not only has health benefits but leads to improved academic performance.

**Breakfast for Academic Success** As the legislature and the Governor look to close the achievement gap, one important step is to ensure that kids start the day with breakfast. Whether by establishing breakfast at all

elementary schools or by requiring “severe need” schools to offer the program, the legislature must not let another session go by without addressing the problem of access to breakfast at school faced by our neediest students.

**Connecting Health Care and School Meals** State Superintendent Jack O’Connell recently announced that the (CFPA-sponsored) effort to automatically enroll children in families receiving welfare or food stamps using a state-wide computer matching system has been enormously successful. Building upon this success, California can be the first state to automatically enroll children who participate in MediCAL for free school meals without additional paperwork or hassles. With the existence of the computer matching system and the state’s interest in getting nutritious food to children in public health care programs, the time has come for California to lead the way and expand direct certification.

**Water** California has banned sales of soda at schools. This is an important step; however, to change children’s habits, these beverages should be replaced with the drink doctors recommend: water. Getting water at school can be difficult. Water fountains are rare, dirty or inoperable. Free tap water is often not found in the lunch room due to confusion over federal school lunch rules, local beverage contracts and costs of offering water in a pitcher or jug for students. These obstacles have impeded efforts to provide free water to students. The legislature can remove these barriers and ensure that all students have access to healthy and delicious California water.

### 3. Fruits and Vegetables for All

*Nutrition advice may have changed over the years but there has been one constant: eat more fruits and vegetables. Increased fruit and vegetable consumption is not only good for the health of Californians but also for the economic health of the state. Too many Californians still struggle to afford fresh produce, yet the legislature and the Governor can help.*

**RESTORE THE CALIFORNIA FRESH START PROGRAM** This very successful program, which provided additional servings of fresh fruit in school cafeterias with breakfast, was terminated in 2007. Given the program’s success and the continuing need to grow healthier students, the legislature must find a way to bring the program back.

**KEEP THE HEALTHY PURCHASE PILOT ON TRACK** Governor Schwarzenegger signed AB 2384 into law in 2006. This bill established the Healthy Purchase Pilot to make fresh produce more affordable to low-income Californians. The Pilot will provide a financial incentive to food stamp recipients using their EBT cards to buy produce and assist corner stores to offer fresh fruits and vegetables. The legislature must keep this program on track.



**STEPS TOWARD A SALAD BAR IN EVERY SCHOOL** Salad bars have been successful in increasing selection of healthy foods by school kids throughout the state. But not every school has one. As more and more cooking is done off-campus, many schools in California are not ready for fresh food preparation. Some schools can’t get over the initial costs of purchasing the bar or the on-site refrigeration and plumbing needed to handle fresh produce. The legislature can help overcome these one-time hurdles to help schools start salad bars (which also can be used as fresh fruit bars at breakfast time), increasing the amount of California-grown produce consumed at schools and bringing additional federal reimbursement funds with new breakfast and lunch participants.

## 4. Strengthening the Food Stamp Program

*The Food Stamp Program is growing in California – very slowly. About 2 million Californians in California get food stamps to improve their health and nutrition. But in other ways program growth is stifled: about 2 million eligible Californians don't get food stamps. California ranks last in the country in reaching the working poor and is turning away over \$2 billion in federal benefits. There is a lot that can be done without legislation to improve food stamps in California, but the legislature must also do its part by exercising state options to strengthen the program.*

**CLOSING THE DEAL TO CONNECT HEALTH CARE AND FOOD STAMPS** AB 433 from Assembly Member Jim Beall would make it easier for MediCAL recipients in California to get food stamps and would seek to rename the program to reflect its role as a health and nutrition support. After some last-minute drama at the close of the 2007 session, the bill is ready to be moved quickly to the Governor. The legislature should put passage of AB 433 on its early session to-do list and the Governor should sign this important effort.

**REMOVING UNNECESSARY PAPERWORK** Assembly Member John Laird has been leading the charge to move California to a six-month reporting system for food stamps. Such action would allow California to enjoy what 46 other states have experienced: increased participation, administrative efficiencies and fewer program errors. With the Governor's own proposal on the table in the last session, resolution looked promising. However, as the 2008 Session begins, progress has been stalled by restrictive CalWORKs provisions sought by the Governor that would undermine the benefits of six-month reporting. The legislature and the Governor must take action and recognize that a true 6-month reporting system makes sense for food stamps and for CalWORKs.

### **Looking Ahead:**

*The legislature will be in the second year of a two-year session. That means that new issues must move at a quicker pace. Recognizing this, CFPA asks the legislature to set the stage for future action on several problems:*

**Removing the Reduced Price Category for School Meals:** Children in low-wage, working families often pay a reduced price co-pay for their school meals (generally, 40 cents for lunch). While 40 cents may not seem like much, it is a significant barrier to lunch participation and healthy eating. Serving these kids for free would increase participation which would draw in more federal resources and ensure more kids got a healthy meal at school. Steps can be taken now to set the stage for the removal of this barrier.

**School Junk Food Free Zones:** California's efforts to remove junk food from schools have created a healthier school environment for students. But these efforts are often undermined by mobile vendors who hover on the edge of school campuses and by the exodus of students to the surrounding neighborhood to buy fast food and unhealthy snacks during the school day. This is a complex problem worthy of the attention and interest of policymakers.

**Stopping Stigma Sandwiches:** When parents fall behind on school lunch payments, many school districts, principals and teachers help cover the cost of continuing to provide meals to students. But in an unknown number of districts, children are punished for this debt through the use of "alternate meals" or as the media calls them, "stigma sandwiches." This too, is a complex issue worthy of attention as CFPA wants to ensure kids who can't afford meals aren't denied lunch and that food is not used as a tool to punish children.