

WELFARE AGITATOR



The latest news and practical information on poverty and hunger policy in Allegheny County.

Want to get Just Harvest's
Welfare Agitator by email?

Contact us at

info@justharvest.org

PA News

Governor Ends Food Stamp Asset Test

As of April 27, food stamp applicants no longer need to submit bank statements for checking and savings accounts and vehicle registration(s) to show that their savings and second cars (if they have them) are worth below \$5,500 (\$9,000 for seniors).

The extra paperwork the asset test required was burdensome for Department of Human Services employees, leading to unnecessary delays for those desperate for food assistance. This contributed to PA being among the worst in the nation for its slow application processing.

Just Harvest and our fellow anti-hunger advocates had been lobbying against Pennsylvania's unfair, wasteful, and completely unnecessary food stamp asset test since former Governor Tom Corbett put it in place in 2012. Because the asset test is a state administrative option in federal food stamp rules, Gov. Wolf and Human Services Secretary Ted Dallas were able to take this action on their own; no approval or action by the state legislature was required.

Two New State Bills Aim to Criminalize People in Poverty

In the continuing attempt to portray food stamp and TANF recipients as lazy drug addicts not worthy of receiving public benefits, Rep. Mike Regan (R-Cumberland and York) and Rep. Tim Krieger (R-Westmoreland) have introduced two bills in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives: House Bill (HB) 222 and HB 1380, respectively. HB 222 would enact a 20 year ban on receiving SNAP/food stamps and TANF for anyone convicted of felony drug distribution while receiving public benefits. HB 1380 would implement a drug test for applicants and recipients of public assistance.

Despite what legislators claim, this is not about public policy. These kinds of bills get brought up time and time again, typically by Republican legislators around budget season when discussions are underway about priorities in public spending. This is their

New Rules on Food Stamps for ABAWDs

As of January 1, 2016, able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) age 18-49 will only be able to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits ("food stamps") for three months in a three-year time period unless they work at least 20 hours/week, do some other federally qualified work activity, or are medically exempt.

Since 1997, ABAWDs had been required to work or to participate in a job training activity in order to receive food stamps. Emergency rules allowed those requirements to be waived statewide during the recent years of economic crisis. Beginning next year, 23 states, including Pennsylvania, will no longer qualify for the waiver.

Consumers who use SNAP/food stamps but do not receive cash assistance and are in a welfare Employment and Training Program are eligible for the same special allowances that cash assistance consumers use. You can get help to pay for childcare and school expenses such as books and transportation.

attempt to shape that debate and to pave the way for cuts in human services by demeaning people who receive public benefits and painting them as "unworthy". Future cuts to food stamps and TANF are easier when you've framed benefit recipients as drug users and drug dealers.

By attempting to pass these types of laws, it creates a (false) perception that they are needed, when in reality, the lawmakers are wasting their time and taxpayer dollars.

YOUR VOICE HAS POWER:

Call your PA House Representative today!

Tell him/her: "Stop framing me as a drug addict!

Vote NO on HB 222 and HB 1380!"

➤ Find his contact info on page 2 or look up your legislator online at www.bit.ly/findPArep

State Senators

James R. Brewster (D-45)
(412) 664-5200

Jay Costa (D-43)
(412)-241-6690

Wayne D. Fontana (D-42)
(412)-344-2551

Rudolph Vulakovich (R-38)
(412)-487-6607

State Representatives

Robert F. Matzie (D-16)
(724)-266-7774

Jake Wheatley (D-19)
(412)-471-7760

Adam Ravenstahl (D-20)
(412)-321-5523

Dom Costa (D-21)
(412)-361-2040

Dan Frankel (D-23)
(412)-422-1774

Ed Gainey (D-24)
(412)-665-5502

Joseph F. Markosek (D-25)
(412)-856-8284

Daniel J. Deasy (D-27)
(412)-928-9514

Mike Turzai (R-28)
(412)-369-2230

Harold A. English (R-30)
(412)-487-6605

Anthony M. DeLuca (D-32)
(412)-793-2448

Frank Dermody (D-33)
(724)-274-4770

Paul Costa (D-34)
(412)-273-3400

Marc J. Gergely (D-35)
(412)-476-3046

Harry Readshaw (D-36)
(412)-881-4208

William C. Kortz (D-38)
(412)-886-2870

Rick Saccone (R-39)
(412)-653-1025

John Maher (R-40)
(412)-831-8080

Daniel L. Miller (D-42)
(412)-343-3870

Mark Mustio (R-44)
(412)-262-3780

Nick Kotik (D-45)
(412)-264-4260

Jason A. Ortity (R-46)
(412)-221-5110

Eli Evankovich (R-54)
(724)-335-2790

What Pennsylvania Needs in a State Budget and Why It Matters

June 30 was the deadline for Pennsylvania to sign a state budget for next year. Every budget is an expression of priorities, and Gov. Wolf was elected last November because a majority of Pennsylvanians believed then-Gov. Corbett had the wrong ones. For four years he marched our state in the wrong direction.

Since taking office, Governor Wolf has made clear to the state legislature what their new priorities should be and has drafted a budget that would support those priorities:

- Resourcing our chronically underfunded human services agencies;
- Returning the more than \$1 billion dollars that early childhood, K-12, and secondary schools lost during Corbett's term, and adding \$1 billion more to public prek-12 funding. PA is one of only three states in the nation that doesn't use state funding to balance out gaps between rich and poor school districts;
- Reforming our horribly unfair state tax structure to provide tax relief to lower- and middle-income Pennsylvanians. PA has the 6th most regressive tax system in the nation—it takes more from people with less income and vice versa;
- Raising the minimum wage to \$10.10.

And what makes those four R's possible? Another R: Revenue. In order to achieve these tax cuts for low-income families and increased investments in our children we need to raise the amount of money the state collects to pay for it. Raising taxes on a natural gas industry that is reaping profits from Marcellus Shale drilling—something Republican leaders are refusing to do—helps get us to that goal.

The majority of Pennsylvanians are still with the governor; they share these priorities. But the Republican-controlled House and Senate have delivered a budget bill, HB 1192, that offers Pennsylvania nothing. It does not even go part-way towards funding the kinds of services and

tax changes that would clearly serve this state's citizens.

So now we are at an "impasse" where neither side will budge. Wolf vetoed the Republicans' misguided budget and he refuses to back down despite their attempts to blame the frozen budget entirely on him.

The effects of not having a budget vary from government-funded agency to agency. Vital social services such as WIC programs, medical assistance, unemployment compensation, and food stamps will continue because state employees will continue to work and get paid, as required by past court decisions.

But if a deal can't be reached soon, the outlook could soon turn grim for schools and for counties and nonprofits that provide social services. Due to five years of flat state funding for human services, agencies that provide "foster care, residential services for children, drug and alcohol counseling, and in-home care for people with disabilities" are operating without a cushion.

It is shameful that we have a frozen budget because of a stand-off between Republican leadership of the legislature and the governor. Our legislators should be scrambling to improve the lives of PA citizens, not taking them hostage to score political points.

YOUR VOICE HAS POWER:

Call Gov. Wolf's office today!

Tell him: "We need a responsible budget, and human services needs critical increases in funding. Don't settle for anything less."

➤ (717) 787-2500 | (412) 565-5700

Call your legislators' offices today!

Tell your senator and representative that you support Gov. Wolf's budget plan and that it's time for a responsible state budget that prioritizes the needs of *all* Pennsylvanians.

➤ Find their contact info to the left or look up your legislator online at www.bit.ly/findPArep

Federal Budget Disaster Ahead

Following the 2014 election Republicans are now the majority in the U.S. House and Senate, but the budget they're proposing will only benefit a slim minority of Americans.

The U.S. House and Senate passed their budgets separately in March. In April a budget conference committee was formed made up of representatives of the two chambers. The task of the committee is to take the House and Senate passed budgets and negotiate a budget "reconciliation" that meets in the middle.

The final outcome was a report that gave instructions to both chambers on how much they need to cut: \$5 trillion over the next 10 years. Currently, that work is underway in various committees. The Appropriations Committee is crafting spending bills for each area of federal government, such as the Agriculture Bill, which is slated to reduce funding for vital programs like WIC.

Other items on the conservatives' agenda:

- Repealing the Affordable Care Act which has insured 16.4 million Americans;
- Cutting Medicaid;
- Cuts to mandatory spending, which includes such programs as food stamps, disability payments for veterans, Pell grants for students, and the Earned Income Tax Credit.
- Cutting taxes for millionaires while raising taxes on 26 million working families and students.

What was defeated in prior rounds of budget negotiations:

- A Democrat-supported House budget amendment that would have cut U.S. poverty in half in 10 years, as well as other Democratic amendments designed to protect U.S. safety net programs and invest in working families.

YOUR VOICE HAS POWER:

Call your U.S. Senators and Representative today!
Tell them what government programs and services are important to you and that the country needs a national budget that reflects the priorities of the majority of Americans.

- Call your U.S. Senator Bob Casey (D-PA):
(202) 224-4254 | (412) 803-7370
- Call your U.S. Senator Pat Toomey (R-PA):
(202) 224-4254 | (412) 803-3501
- Find your U.S. Representative online at
www.bit.ly/findUSrep

Expiration Date on Child Nutrition Programs

Roughly one in five children in our region live in poverty and rely on free school meals to keep from going hungry. What do they do when school is out?

Thanks to federal funding they can head to neighborhood summer meal sites for meals and a snack every day. But this funding is set to expire on September 30.

The U.S. House and the Senate are currently working on the 5-year Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act. This package of policies authorizes all of the federal school meal and child nutrition programs, which provide funding for low-income children to have access to healthy and nutritious foods.

We need to join together to urge our elected legislators to support three bipartisan bills—bills supported by both political parties—that have great potential to dramatically reduce hunger during the summer months and year-round.

- **The Summer Meals Act of 2015** (S. 613, H.R. 1728): This Act would strengthen, protect, and expand access to the Summer Nutrition Programs. These programs help reduce hunger and combat childhood obesity experienced by low-income children over the summer months. These programs also support educational and enrichment programs that keep children learning, engaged, and safe when school is not in session.

- **The Stop Child Summer Hunger Act of 2015** (S. 1539, H.R. 2715): This Act would provide low-income families with an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card for the summer to purchase food. This bill is intended to provide an additional support for children during the summer months, and does not replace the existing Summer Nutrition Programs.

- **The Access to Healthy Food for Young Children Act of 2015** (S. 1833): This Act is sponsored by U.S. Senator from PA Bob Casey and would boost the Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP), giving children in child care and afterschool programs better access to nutritious food.

YOUR VOICE HAS POWER:

Call U.S. Senator Pat Toomey (R-PA) today!
Tell him: "Please pass a robust Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act that would invest in and improve critical child nutrition programs."

- (202) 224-4254 | (412) 803-3501



ACTION AGAINST HUNGER

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VOL. 17 NO. 1

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Did You Know?

- You can now access your welfare benefits online. By setting up a **MyCOMPASS** account online, you can review and print information about the benefits you are currently receiving, see when you are due for a renewal, and report information about changes. To create an account, you will need to have your Case Record number, or an e-form # from a COMPASS application handy, as well either your EBT card or your Social Security Number. You can also use MyCOMPASS to apply for benefits. A screening tool can help you determine which benefits you may be eligible for. Go to www.compass.state.pa.us

- On July 1 the PA Department of Human Services released a version of **COMPASS for smart phones**. As of August it was not yet possible to do a benefits application from mobile view, but you can access MyCOMPASS and check the status of an application.

- All welfare benefits **SAR's (semi-annual renewals)** and **Annual Recertifications** now have a bar code on them so that when you submit them to the PA Dept. of Human Services caseworkers can scan them and automatically attach them to your file for processing. This should make document processing much less time consuming and limit the delay or closure of benefits for clients.

- The expiration date of **Select Plan for Women** is no longer June 30. It has been extended to October 31.

JUST HARVEST CAN HELP!

- Just Harvest can help you apply for food stamps on the phone. We can also help if you are having trouble receiving food stamps, LIHEAP, or cash assistance. Call us for free assistance or a 5-minute eligibility screening: M-F 9am-5pm at (412) 431-8960 x602.
- Just Harvest's **Fresh Access** program enables farmers market shoppers to use their food stamps – as well as credit and debit cards – to buy fresh, nutritious, and locally-grown food. And now, **Fresh Access Food Bucks** give food stamp shoppers an extra \$2.00 to spend on fruits and veggies for every \$5.00 they spend in food stamps at our 15 participating farmers markets! Visit www.justharvest.org/get-help/fresh-access/ to learn more and to get market locations and hours.
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