

Message to legislators: Prioritize our most vulnerable

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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

We all know that times are hard. Demand for emergency food boxes is at an all-time high, unemployment in Oregon is the second highest in the nation and reliance on food stamps and public assistance is soaring. In these tough economic times, countless individuals and non-profit organizations have been working throughout the legislative session to make sure that our elected officials prioritize our most vulnerable citizens. Oregon Food Bank is one of those organizations and here is a quick summary of our legislative work in the past few months.

The legislative session began with a quick and decisive victory with the passage of House Bill (HB) 2436. This bill established a document recording fee which will fund the preservation and building of new affordable housing units and will assist counties with their efforts to end homelessness. HB 2436 was a great win for housing and anti-poverty advocates, but at that point, our work had just begun.

Oregon Food Bank is supporting three bills that would help provide food to hungry Oregonians. All three bills are currently sitting in the Joint Ways and Means Committee. The first, HB 5019, is a general budget bill which includes funding for the Oregon Food Bank Network. Historically the food bank has received \$2 million from the state but with demand for emergency food boxes up over fifteen percent statewide, the Network is asking for an additional \$1 million to help meet the increasing need. The bill is currently sitting in the

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Transportation and Economic Subcommittee of Ways and Means.

Two additional anti-hunger bills would provide nutritious food to our most vulnerable citizens: pregnant women, children and senior citizens. HB 2924 supports the Farm Direct Nutrition Program (FDNP) which provides eligible seniors and WIC (Women, Infants and Children) participants with coupons to be spent at local farmers markets. This program supports local agriculture and ensures that struggling families can purchase nutritious

fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, the FDNP program received a proposed \$200,000 cut in the Ways and Means Co-chairs' budget. Advocacy efforts will be needed not only to expand FDNP but to preserve it for the future biennium. The bill has a nominal fiscal impact and is currently sitting in the Human Services Subcommittee of Ways and Means.

The school breakfast bill, Senate Bill (SB) 695, is in the Education Subcommittee of Ways and Means. This bill would eliminate the 30-cent per meal co-pay for school breakfasts for children between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Eliminating the co-pay in other states has increased participation rates of over 45 percent. Participation at this level would

bring more than \$4 million of federal matching funds to the state.

In addition to these food bills, Oregon Food Bank has been working to expand health care and protect anti-poverty programs. House Bill 2116 would expand health care coverage to 80,000 children and roughly 100,000 low-income adults. These expansions would be funded through a provider and insurance tax, both of which would be reimbursed at a 2:1 rate by the federal government. Implementation of these taxes would bring Oregon more than \$1 billion of federal funds. HB 2116 is currently in the Revenue committee and will then be referred to Ways and Means.

On May 15th, the state's revenue forecast revealed a \$4 billion deficit in the 2009-11 budget which includes \$351 million needed to balance the current 2007-09 budget which ends on June 30th, 2009. In response to the forecast, the Co-chairs of the Ways and Means Committee released their budget on May 18th. The cuts to human services as outlined in this budget are dramatic. Advocacy efforts are needed not only to expand programs for the upcoming biennium, but also to protect programs from the proposed cuts outlined in this budget.

With just five weeks left of the legislative session, there is much work to be done. Contact your legislator and let them know that you prioritize programs which feed hungry Oregonians and protect the most vulnerable. Supporting anti-hunger and poverty programs is not only the right thing for families; it is the right solution to this economic crisis.



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