

Encourage healthy eating, don't add unnecessary regulation

Written by Minnesota Department of Human Services Commissioner Lucinda Jesson
Thursday, 04 July 2013 10:33

Recently a group of 18 mayors from major U.S. cities sent Congress a letter urging them not to cut funding in the Farm Bill for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the program formerly known as food stamps. It is good news for Minnesota farmers, grocers and those who rely upon SNAP that the bill was defeated Thursday night.

I am grateful that these mayors spoke out on this issue, because SNAP, as they say in their letter, is vital to approximately 47 million Americans, more than half of whom are children and seniors, facing food insecurity and poverty. In Minnesota, the federally funded program is the first line of defense against hunger for more than 500,000 of our neighbors. It is also good for the economy, generating \$1.73 in economic activity for every \$1.00 in SNAP benefits spent.

But also in their letter they press to limit the ability of SNAP participants to purchase sugar-sweetened beverages and unhealthy foods as a means of fighting the rise of obesity and diet-related diseases.

I share their concern about the well-being of our children, and agree that proper nutrition is vital to their safe and healthy development. We know that proper nutrition not only keeps our bodies well, but helps children learn more easily, adults work more productively, and seniors maintain their independence.

But putting restrictions on what people can eat is not the best way to foster health. Studies show that there is little difference in the eating habits of the poor compared to others and no evidence of a causal relationship between SNAP participation and obesity. Putting artificial constraints on what types of food poor families can purchase with SNAP not only makes little sense from a public health perspective, but it adds additional administrative complexity to an already complex program.

We are much better off encouraging consumption of fruits, vegetables and other nutritious foods by providing incentives. Currently, two such innovative incentive programs are underway in Minnesota.

That is why this week the Department of Human Services launched a pilot program encouraging SNAP recipients to purchase locally-grown fresh fruits and vegetables at grocery stores. The SNAP+ pilot, in partnership with the Minnesota Grocers Association and Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Minnesota Grown program, provides SNAP recipients who purchase \$5 or more in fresh produce with a \$5 coupon toward their next produce purchase at one of three participating stores – Almsted's Fresh Market in Crystal, Super One Foods in Duluth and Teal's Market in Cass Lake.

Similarly, for the fourth consecutive year, SNAP participants can stretch their dollars further with the "Market Bucks" incentive from Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota.

More than 50 farmers markets across the state will match SNAP purchases with up to \$5 in "Market Bucks" to be used any time during the 2013 season on the local, healthy food purchased at these farmers markets.

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To implement additional restrictions on SNAP benefits without evidence to support them would be an unnecessary administrative burden for grocers as well as on poor, working families that rely on SNAP. There are better ways to increase the health of Minnesotans. Instead we should provide incentives for purchasing healthy food and fund SNAP for all who need it.

Preventing cuts to SNAP is a critical first step in maintaining and improving the health of all Minnesotans, but the next is to use the most effective means to promote healthier eating. The initiatives outlined here are a great stride in this effort to ensure that everyone has the right fuel to power their lives.