

## Anti-hunger advocates want state's bonus used for outreach

**BY NANCY HICKS / Lincoln Journal Star**

Friday, Aug 08, 2008 - 04:49:04 pm CDT

The state should use its expected \$1 million in bonus food stamp money to improve its outreach programs, says a group of seven anti-hunger advocacy organizations.

The state could use some of the bonus money to simplify its 17- page application form, expand food stamp office hours and increase promotional efforts, said Scott Young, executive director of the Lincoln Food Bank.

But the state is making no promises it will use its bonus money to encourage more people to apply for food stamps.

[+]Enlarge



Scott Young

In past years, the state has used bonus money primarily for equipment and staff training, said Kathy Osterman, spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services.

As food and fuel prices go up, the state should be encouraging more people who qualify to use the food stamp program, according to anti-hunger advocates.

Sixty-five percent of eligible Nebraskans participate, according to the

group's news release, and the need for food assistance is growing.

Based on its mobile pantry tracking system and anecdotal information, the Food Bank has seen more people who need food, Young said.

As food and fuel prices rise, staff also is reporting increasing numbers of calls from people who say they have never gone to a food pantry before, Young said.

"I would suggest need is greater than any time I've been at the food bank," said Young, who has been director for seven years.

HHS has been awarded about \$1 million for payment accuracy and low error rates. The agency provided a very formal response to questions about the anti-hunger groups' request, saying there will be a public announcement on the funds in September.

"Right now, we are exploring ways to maintain our food stamp accuracy and improve the effectiveness of the program, and we have not made any final decisions," Osterman said about use of the bonus funds.

Last fiscal year, Nebraskans spent about \$130 million in food stamps, with an average of 52,160 households participating each month.

Simplifying the 17-page application would help bring in more people, Young said.

Oregon shortened its burdensome application to a couple of pages, and the participation rate increased greatly, Young said.

He also suggested HHS take full advantage of its efficient and accurate system to see that families are getting enough food and communities are benefiting economically from the food stamps used at grocery stores.

It's estimated that every \$5 in food stamps generates \$10 in economic activity, Young said.

“We urge the state to take advantage of the opportunity that the food stamp bonus provides to reach more low-income people,” he said.

Participating agencies include Community Action of Nebraska, Human Services Federation of Lincoln and Lancaster County, Matt Talbot Kitchen and Outreach, Center for People in Need, Nebraska Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest and the Food Bank.

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