

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 5, 2003

The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General
U.S. General Accounting Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

In the past decade, the nation's federal safety net has undergone a fundamental transformation from a system that focused on income support to one that emphasizes the ultimate goals of employment and economic independence. As states implemented welfare reform, federal and state welfare programs put less emphasis on cash assistance and more on providing work support through programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, child care subsidies and transportation benefits. Support programs assist low-income working families by subsidizing some of the expenses associated with work outside the home as well as everyday necessities.

The federal Food Stamp Program is a critical component of this work support system. The program's primary mission is to assure that low-income Americans have access to a healthy diet. By providing targeted food assistance to low-income working families, the program can also help adults enter and stay in the workforce. There is evidence, however, that the program has not achieved its work-support potential. Fewer than half of eligible working families are participating in the program. This means that low-income working families are forfeiting available food dollars that can support their efforts to join and remain in the workforce.

The relatively low participation rate among low-income working families raises questions as to why these families do not participate and if there are access barriers specific to this population. During the Food Stamp Program's recent reauthorization in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, Congress included a number of provisions to foster participation by working families. At the same time, the USDA and several states have introduced outreach efforts and other innovative strategies designed to increase participation in the program among traditionally under-participating groups such as working families.

We request that GAO provide Congress with information on:

- (1) the most recent data available on food stamp participation among working individuals and families;
- (2) what is known about why low-income working families do or do not participate in the Food Stamp Program;

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- (3) a summary of any benefit delivery practices, such as monthly reporting, finger-imaging and frequent office visits that would tend to deter working families' access to the Food Stamp Program;
- (4) how food stamp benefits can be bundled with other work supports, such as health insurance and employment and training services, and the extent to which this is currently being done;
- (5) the extent to which food stamp program policy options available to states, particularly those newly passed as part of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 such as semi-annual reporting, enhance the ability of working families to utilize the Food Stamp Program;
- (6) a review of innovative outreach and benefit delivery practices currently being used on the state and local levels to enroll working families in the Food Stamp Program; and
- (7) recommendations for changes in how the Food Stamp Program is operated to increase the participation of working families.

We appreciate your assistance on this issue. Please contact our staff if you have any questions about this request.

Sincerely,



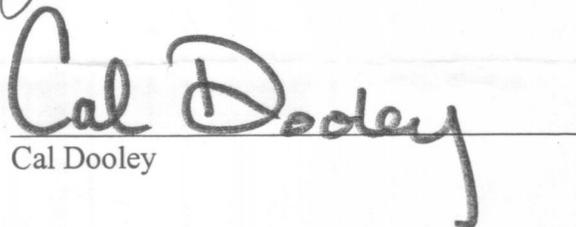
Tom Harkin



John M. Spratt Jr.



Patrick Leahy



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