

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

March 21, 1980

Mr. Max Frankel
Editorial Page Editor
The New York Times

1000 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 900
Washington, D. C. 20036

Dear Editor:

As supporters of the food stamp program and the benefits it provides our needy citizens, we must take issue with your March 21, 1980, editorial entitled "Squeeze the Budget, Not the Poor". The editorial states that "It is nonetheless possible to act humanely while finding savings in anti-poverty spending. For example, food stamp recipients whose children also get free school lunches are receiving a double subsidy. Eliminating the duplication would save \$1 billion next year."

In order to realize the annual cost savings of \$1 billion, which you advocate in your editorial, the total federal cash reimbursement per meal for free and reduced price lunches (\$1.05 and 94.89 cents, respectively, projected for FY '81) would have to be deducted from the benefits received by the food stamp households containing children attending schools that operate a lunch program. Yet, the average per person per meal benefit for the food stamp program is projected to be only 42 cents in fiscal year 1981, with a maximum benefit of about 58 cents. The higher school lunch reimbursement reflects the labor and other costs incidental to the preparation and service of the meal, but these costs do not specifically benefit the food stamp recipients or increase their nutritional well-being.

If the "overlap" reduction were made on the basis of per meal food stamp benefits rather than school lunch reimbursements, the resulting savings would be approximately one-half or less than the \$1 billion you are assuming in your editorial. Even if this approach were adopted, there would be the same problem of innumerable households suffering reductions that would be far in excess of their food stamp benefits. This is due to the fact that food stamp benefits are based, for households of the same size, on household income. Yet, the more equitable method of taking individual household circumstances into account would substantially reduce projected cost savings and prove to be administratively unworkable.

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The amount of food stamps that participants receive in the food stamp program is based on the Department of Agriculture's thrifty food plan. The thrifty food plan is the least costly food plan devised by the federal government. Since the advent of its use in 1975, as the basis for determining food stamp benefits, it has been generally recognized that the thrifty food plan is not necessarily adequate for participating households. It is based on a two-parent household with two elementary school children. Households whose composition is significantly different from this norm may be disadvantaged because of this deviation. For instance, the thrifty food plan cost for a household containing a mother and three teenage boys is nearly \$20, or 10 per cent, a month more than for the norm household.

The current situation under which school lunch benefits are not deducted from a household's food stamp benefits is not accidental. Rather, the additional help recognizes the potential nutritional inadequacies of the thrifty food plan and seeks to minimize these deficiencies in a specifically targeted, potentially vulnerable group -- poor, school-age children. This situation is no different from the receipt of food stamps by mothers and infants receiving WIC (the special supplemental food program) program benefits, or the people who participate in elderly feeding programs. In each case, the federal government has recognized the special needs of special classes within our population.

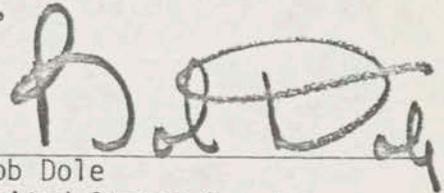
We are not opposed to fiscal responsibility. Like our colleagues, we are seeking ways to bring spiraling inflation under control. However, this does not mean that we must unthinkingly accept every potential budget reduction that is offered. There are ways of cutting the federal budget that would not create further hardship for the most vulnerable of the poor -- those with children. There are alternatives that we will be exploring and hopefully see enacted into law in the near future.

It seems ironic that, at a time when the American public is beginning to appreciate the relationship between nutrition and health, The Times chooses to advocate a budget cut that may in fact result in increased federal health expenditures in the future.

Sincerely yours,



George S. McGovern
United States Senator
Chairman, Subcommittee on Nutrition



Bob Dole
United States Senator
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Nutrition