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New law will improve administration of food stamps, help Colorado families access needed nutrition

DENVER (June 1, 2016) – Coloradans facing hunger may now have fewer barriers to accessing nutritious food thanks to a bill passed unanimously by the state legislature. Gov. John Hickenlooper joined state and county leaders at Arapahoe County Human Services on June 1 to sign Senate Bill 16-190 into law. The bipartisan legislation, sponsored by the Joint Budget Committee, seeks to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of food stamps and other programs in Colorado.

"These are people in need, and they qualify for assistance, but our current systems don't always do a good job of getting them the help they need," said Sen. Pat Steadman, the lead bill sponsor in the Senate. “The Joint Budget Committee wanted increased accountability for counties in exchange for a fair examination of the resources and processes required to meet performance standards. SB-190 will improve the well-being of vulnerable populations in our community and the efficiency of public assistance programs."

The Food Assistance Program, commonly known as food stamps, provides eligible families with modest monthly funds to purchase food, averaging only about $1.40 per person, per meal. The majority of those eligible are children, seniors, working adults, veterans and individuals who are disabled.

Colorado has experienced longstanding issues with the administration of food stamps and underperformance in some key metrics at the state and county levels. Colorado ranks 45th in the U.S. for access to food stamps and has hovered near the bottom of the national rankings for more than a decade. As a result, the state loses more than $686 million in grocery sales annually—funds that could help Coloradans in need as well as boost local communities and the state’s economy.

“Some of our Colorado counties have had difficulties processing eligibility for the programs that provide food assistance and other critical services. Time delays and error rates have exceeded acceptable levels,” said Rep. Bob Rankin, the lead bill sponsor in the House. “Senate Bill 190 will incentivize the counties to share best practices and design their own improvement programs. County administrators were very involved in drafting the bill and would like to serve our needy citizens more effectively.”

The legislation takes three important steps to alleviating hunger in Colorado:
• First, it creates an incentive for counties to look at issues in their administration of food stamps by empowering the State of Colorado to pass through existing federal bonuses and penalties to those counties that drive the receipt for either. Counties will work closely with the State to establish the formula, and this helps to further clarify the expectations for both the state and the counties.

• Second, it calls for an in-depth analysis of why aspects of food stamps and other public assistance programs work better in some counties than others, in addition to what resources are needed to tailor and implement best practices at a local level.

• Third, it aligns with the addition of three key staff for the Food Assistance office at the Colorado Department of Human Services, which was approved in the state budget. The new positions include a program manager, a fiscal analyst and a performance analyst. Each will increase the capacity of a severely understaffed office so the state can better support the counties in finding and implementing opportunities to improve their delivery of food assistance.

“This new Senate Bill provides another opportunity for Colorado counties to share our work to eliminate hunger,” said Arapahoe County Commissioner Nancy Sharpe. “Arapahoe County has created new technology to help those who rely on us to receive the highest quality of service that is fast and accurate. It is important to us to make sure our families and individuals who are struggling to get by do not go hungry. We welcome the opportunity to share our efforts towards building strong communities and will continue to promote the independence and stability of individuals and families.”

Senate Bill 190 was closely negotiated by Republicans and Democrats, with active involvement from Colorado counties and strong support from a diverse array of stakeholders, including health, faith-based, agriculture and economic-focused entities. It was sponsored by Sen. Pat Steadman (D-Denver) and Rep. Bob Rankin (R-Carbondale) and co-sponsored by Rep. Millie Hamner (D-Dillon), Rep. Dave Young (D-Greeley), Sen. Kevin Grantham (R-Cañon City) and Sen. Kent Lambert (R-Colorado Springs).

The bill was introduced in the State Senate on April 19 and quickly advanced through the House and Senate with unanimous support. The law will go into effect upon the governor’s signature.

“This bill is about real people and paves the way for streamlining enrollment in a vital program,” said Kathy Underhill, CEO of Hunger Free Colorado, the state’s leading anti-hunger organization. “In an era when bipartisan measures are rare, we are glad folks can come together around something as basic and human as access to nutritious food.”

Learn more about Senate Bill 16-190 at HungerFreeColorado.org.

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