

For Immediate Release

August 22, 2008

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OCPP Analysis Shows Oregon Makes Progress Against Food Insecurity

(Silverton) — Oregon made headway in its efforts against food insecurity in the two years before the current economic downturn hit, according to an analysis of state survey data by the Oregon Center for Public Policy (OCPP).

The share of adult Oregonians in households experiencing food insecurity was 9.4 percent in 2007, down from 12.3 percent in 2006 and 15.7 percent in 2005, according to OCPP's new analysis of the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey, a health survey conducted jointly by the Centers for Disease Control and the Oregon Department of Human Services.

Households facing "food insecurity" are those that are not always sure where their next meal is coming from. In most cases, people in these homes manage to avoid actual hunger. However, in about one in three food insecure homes last year members were forced to go hungry at times.

"In 2006 and 2007, Oregon's economy was relatively favorable for low-income workers and this, combined with improvements in state policies designed to help low-income households, made it easier for the most vulnerable Oregonians to put food on the table," said Joy Margheim, policy analyst with OCPP.

Margheim cautioned that the survey data does not reflect the tougher economic times that have hit Oregon this year.

"This year, Oregon has been losing jobs, the unemployment rate has risen, and the cost of food and gas has climbed," she said. "The good news from 2006 and 2007 shouldn't make Oregon complacent about fighting hunger. There are a lot of families in Oregon who are struggling today."

Margheim noted that improvements in Oregon's public assistance infrastructure were crucial to the fight against food insecurity in 2006 and 2007. For example, earlier this decade Oregon changed the eligibility rules for

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its food stamp program to allow more families access to food stamps. Today the number of Oregonians accessing food stamps is double what it was in 1999.

“Because we improved the program, an Oregonian who gets a modest job today is less likely to lose food stamps and other benefits tied to food stamp access,” said Margheim, noting that the food stamp rolls continued to grow modestly in 2006 and 2007 despite the economy’s relative strength. “That additional support for working families can make all the difference.”

OCPP’s analysis found that the most severe form of food insecurity — hunger — also improved between 2005 and 2007. The analysis concluded that the share of Oregon adults in homes where at least some members went hungry at times fell from 5.6 percent in 2005 to 3.2 percent in 2007.

Consistent with its analyses of the state health survey in past years, OCPP’s analysis also found that adults in households with children were more likely to experience food insecurity than those in homes without children, and that women were more likely than men to report living in food insecure homes.

The state health survey analyzed by OCPP has included questions on food insecurity since 2001. OCPP has analyzed each year of survey results and found no improvement in food insecurity until 2006 and 2007.

A national survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau also contains questions on food insecurity. Because this national survey is conducted in all 50 states, it makes comparisons across states possible. In the latest results from this survey, for the 2004-06 period, Oregon’s food insecurity rate placed it in the middle of the pack among states. Results for the 2005-07 period will be released this fall.

“While we can celebrate the good news in the state survey, it’s clear that we still have much work to do before food insecurity and hunger cease to be a barrier to opportunity for Oregon’s working families,” said Margheim. “Even with our gains against food insecurity before the downturn struck, one in eleven Oregon adults lived in a home struggling to get food on the table. That’s too many,” she added.

The Oregon Center for Public Policy is a non-partisan research institute that does in-depth research and analysis on budget, tax, and economic issues. The Center’s goal is to improve decision making and generate more opportunities for all Oregonians.