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Contact: Beth Voigt
Communications
(651) 431-3833

Lt. Governor Prettner Solon announces food support coalition

New coalition to ensure more low-income Minnesotans have opportunity to purchase healthy foods, eat more nutritiously; Governor proclaims January Food Support and Nutrition Outreach Month

Recognizing the growing need for Minnesotans, particularly seniors, to eat nutritiously to maintain their health, Lt. Governor Yvonne Prettner Solon announced the launch of the Minnesota Nutritious Food Coalition, a public-private partnership to raise awareness and increase participation in the federal Food Support program, and provide guidance on means of better serving Minnesotans in need of healthy food. Governor Dayton also proclaimed January [Food Support and Nutrition Outreach Month](#).

The coalition, comprised of experts from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, University of Minnesota Extension, Greater Twin Cities United Way, Second Harvest Heartland, Hunger Solutions Minnesota, Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, Minnesota Grocers Association, General Mills Foundation, counties and numerous other state, business, nonprofit and community partners, met today, and will meet quarterly thereafter. Their main charge will be to address food access issues, increase participation in the federally funded Food Support program, identify barriers and areas for expansion, and develop a coordinated outreach effort to ensure all Minnesotans who are eligible for the program have an opportunity to apply for it.

An increasing number of low-income Minnesotans are using food shelves and Food Support, the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program formerly known as Food Stamps. In addition to the health benefits, Food Support is also a significant asset to the economy, as it generates \$1.73 of economic activity for every \$1 that is spent.

“More than 500,000 Minnesotans access Food Support benefits monthly,” said Lieutenant Governor Prettner Solon, who was instrumental in launching the coalition. “Yet, many more, particularly seniors, are eligible for the program. The guidance, work and support of this coalition will encourage more Minnesotans to take advantage of this program so they can get the nutritious food needed for a healthy lifestyle, not to mention strengthen our local economy.”

Currently, only 65 percent of eligible Minnesotans and 41 percent of eligible seniors, age 60 and over, receive Food Support benefits.

The Minnesota Department of Human Services, which is responsible for the Food Support program in Minnesota, and its partners currently are working to:

- Educate communities about the purpose and use of Food Support
- Increase access to program information and application assistance

- Increase participation, especially among the working poor and seniors
- Share information among outreach agencies about the nutrition benefits, program details and application processes to help those eligible make informed decisions.
- Provide nutrition education programming in schools and community settings by University of Minnesota Extension and Minnesota Chippewa Tribe nutrition education instructors who focus on stretching food dollars and making healthy choices.

The coalition will bring these efforts together in a coordinated, cohesive effort, according to Lieutenant Governor Prettner Solon. The benefits of doing so are manifold, she noted, and will include:

- More participation in the Food Support program, which offers needed nutrition to low-income Minnesotans, which benefits:
 - Seniors who, with healthy diets, can live independently in their own homes longer rather than in long-term care facilities.
 - Children, who, when well-nourished, have better school attendance and are more focused on learning.
 - All participants who can now access Food Support at many farmers markets throughout the state to purchase fresh, local produce at a low cost
- An economic boost, creating ripples throughout the economy when new Food Support benefits are redeemed:
 - New Food Support benefits trigger labor and production demand, ultimately increasing household income and triggering additional spending
 - Businesses, including grocery stores and farmers markets, that sell food to Food Support recipients benefit.
- Employees whose food needs are met at home may have higher productivity and take fewer sick days for themselves and their children, according to the USDA.

The department has already implemented legislation and taken steps to improve access for Food Support applicants, including:

- Eliminating the asset limit to qualify for Food Support
- Changing the income limit from 130 percent to 165 percent of the federal poverty guideline
- Shortening and simplifying the application, and providing help to those who want it
- Offering a telephone interview as an option during the application process to make it easier for applicants
- Increasing accessibility via an online application, which is in development
- Providing technical assistance to counties working with recipients and applicants
- Coordinating with partners, including General Mills, Hunger Solutions Minnesota and Hunger-Free Minnesota, to develop and implement a statewide outreach campaign designed to increase participation within the senior and newly eligible populations.

“Collaboration among the Minnesota Nutritious Food Coalition members is the key to this effort,” said Lieutenant Governor Prettner Solon. “By combining our efforts at the national, state and local level with leaders in nonprofit community agencies, businesses and all others who touch the lives of potentially eligible Food Support recipients, we can increase Food Support use. That’s good for low-income Minnesotans, good for businesses and good for our economy.”