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**For Immediate Release**

## **Families Participating in the Food Stamp Program Passes 90,000 for the First Time**

**(New Mexico's Working Families and Economy Benefit from the Increase)**

*Santa Fe, October 15, 2004* – The Human Services Department's sizeable Food Stamp Program has surpassed the 90,000 mark, at 90,440, for the first time ever. "This is good news, not bad news," said Pamela Hyde, Human Services Department Secretary. "The state's unemployment rate remains low, so I credit our increase in food stamp participation to aggressive outreach efforts that de-stigmatize this valuable program for low-income families, and I credit the hard work being done in our Income Support Division offices around the state to ensure families receive the benefits they are eligible for."

Department of Labor Secretary Conroy Chino concurred, saying, "The last 20 months have been good for New Mexico; while jobs are being lost around the country, New Mexico has been gaining jobs due to growth in various industries. Since January 2003, there are 30,000 more New Mexicans employed."

In January 2003, there were only 73,450 families receiving food stamps. Since then, participating families have increased by 23 percent and there have been no significant federal rule changes that would bring more low-income families into this 100 percent federally funded program.

The Food Stamp Program is income-based, where a family of three earning less than \$20,371 can qualify for some benefits. "Most able-bodied adults, even college students, can qualify if they work only a minimum number of hours each week," said Hyde. The average family receives \$211 per month in food stamps, which can be used in grocery stores to purchase food items only.

In a meeting on October 6 with faith-based and community organizations in Albuquerque, Income Support Division Director Katie Falls urged these organizations to help get more people enrolled in the Food Stamp Program. "The most important reason is that food stamps put cash in people's pockets, allowing them to meet their other daily needs with the money they earn. It only makes sense ... but, while there is a stigma, food stamps are valuable for families and local economies."

Estimates show that for every \$5.00 in food stamps spent, \$9.50 is pumped into local economies. Over the past 12 months, the Food Stamp Program pumped \$228 million into the state's economy. There are several other food security programs that target specific groups of people, such as the Women, Infants and Children's Program and the School Lunch Program, but the Food Stamp Program is the most universal because it doesn't require that there be children in the home for eligibility, making it accessible for the elderly.

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