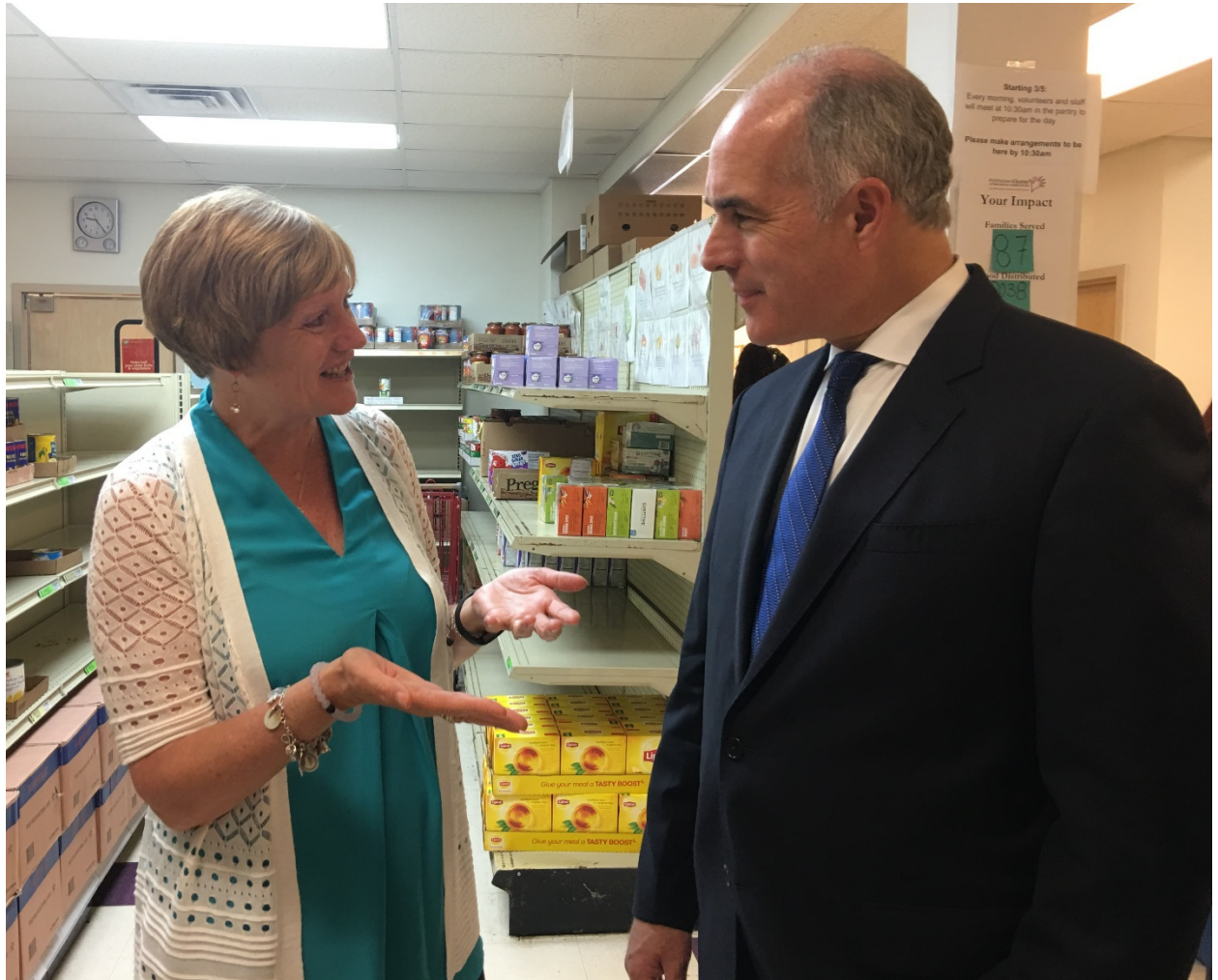


# The Mercury

## Sen. Casey fighting for food fairness in farm bill

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Barbara Wilhelmy, left, Executive Director of the Cluster Outreach Food Pantry In Pottstown, gives U.S. Senator Bob Casey a tour of the facility before he departed for Washington, D.C., to vote on the Senate's farm bill.

POTTSTOWN >> U.S. Sen. Bob Casey stopped by a Pottstown food bank Monday on his way to cast his vote on a farm bill package that could cut the food stamp benefits on which so many of those using the food bank depend.

It's the second time this year Pottstown has been the focus of such votes in Washington. Last month, protestors gathered in Smith Family Plaza to urge U.S. Rep. Ryan Costello, R-6th Dist., to vote against a farm bill in the House of Representatives that makes significant funding cuts to the program.

He voted in support of the House bill.

SNAP stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and is still commonly called "Food Stamps." The program helps feed nearly 140,000 people in Berks, Chester and Montgomery counties.

Montgomery County Commissioners' Chairwoman Val Arkoosh said about 10 percent of Montgomery County's population — about 80,000 people — suffer from “food insecurity,” meaning they do not know where their next meal is coming from and 51,000 of them are children.

Many of them “make too much money to qualify for SNAP,” but even those who do receive an average of only \$123.51 per month from the program, which covers, at best, two weeks of food bills.

“As a result, parents often sacrifice their own health and nutrition to feed their children,” said Arkoosh, who is also a medical doctor. “Cutting funding in the SNAP program will be devastating to these Montco families.”

A bill now coming out of committee in the Senate “with strong bipartisan support,” would restore the SNAP program to its current level, and even add a little more money to encourage the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables, Casey said Monday.

Calling the cuts in the House bill “draconian,” Casey said “this is wrong. This is a program that works. If you want to talk about return on investment, for every dollar you spend on SNAP, the economy gets \$1.80 in return.”

“But beyond that,” said Casey, “there is the moral gravity of this issue.”

The Democratic senator from Pennsylvania said the House bill only passed by two votes and he hopes the strong bipartisan support — including from Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell — will give the Senate an advantage when the two bills go to conference committee in an attempt to craft a bill that can win support in both houses.

There has been no indication yet from the White House, Casey said, whether the bill will receive the President's signature or be vetoed.

“The House bill is a terrible assault on the working poor,” said Patrick Druhan, director of King of Prussia-based Montco Hunger Solutions. “This legislation will push a lot of people off the cliff.”

The new work requirements in the House bill, “are establishing more hoops to make it difficult for people to stay in the program,” Druhan said.

The panel assembled for the visit included two recipients of the SNAP program who use those federal dollars to shop at the food bank run by the Pottstown Cluster of Religious Communities.

Renee Gorski said moving from Pennsylvania to South Carolina and back again kept her out of the program for years because both states considered her and her children to be an “out-of-state” resident.

It took her eight years, therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder, and help from a caseworker to get a job, a place to live and into the SNAP program.

“The Getting Ahead Program saved my whole existence,” said Gorski.

Danielle Gadsen said she struggles to feed her two children and two grandchildren and that her benefits were mysteriously cut off after she began advocating against the House bill.

“I had to rely on my cluster paycheck and it took a lot out of me,” she said. “It's just so draining.”

Janet Simmons said the prices at the Redner's convenience store on High Street, just a few blocks from her house, are higher than at the Giant supermarket in Upland Square, to which she has to walk.

"It's a waste of money for me and for the taxpayers to pay higher prices," Simmons said. "Isn't there some way we can regulate that?"

"These are working women, trying to make ends meet with several part time jobs," said Barbara Wilhelmy, executive director of the Cluster. "I think people have a misunderstanding about the people who come here for food."