

# *New Bill Seeks Money for Food Pantries*

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A bill pending action in the State House of Representatives seeks to give Delaware food banks and food pantries millions of dollars in additional funding each year.

Under a 1982 law, people purchasing bottled, carbonated soft drinks and beer in Delaware pay a five cent deposit on each container. The deposit can be redeemed when the container is returned to the retailer or a redemption center.

Initially enacted to reduce roadside litter, the so-called "Bottle Bill" has never been very effective or popular with retailers. "The result is that most bottles are never returned and the deposit money never redeemed," said State Rep. Bill Oberle (R-Beecher's Lot). "An estimated \$3 million annually is never claimed and winds up in the hands of the beverage distributors."

Under House Bill 307, sponsored by Rep. Oberle and State Sen. Patricia Blevins (D-Elsmere), all the money from unredeemed beverage container deposits would go into a new Food Bank Support Fund. The state-managed fund would give non-profit organizations feeding the needy an opportunity to receive grants to finance their humanitarian work. The Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Health and Social Services would be responsible for structuring the program and issuing annual reports to the General Assembly.

"Our bill would provide a stable source of funding for a vital service," Rep. Oberle said. "I can't think of a much better use for these abandoned deposits than to use them to feed the hungry."

The Bottle Bill has been a source of considerable debate recently. The General Assembly passed legislation (HB 201) last June to repeal it, citing its lack of effectiveness. But Gov. Markell vetoed the measure saying: "Although I am sympathetic to those who argue that the current Bottle Bill system is broken, I am committed to doing what I can to ensure that we replace it with something better."

To that end, the governor unveiled a plan in January to dismantle the Bottle Bill program, transitioning the five cent deposit to a two-cent-per-bottle fee that would be used to support curbside recycling programs around the state.

"I didn't have any foreknowledge about Gov. Markell's plan," Rep. Oberle said. "We have two totally different ideas, which coincidentally target the same funding source. Given the current economy, and the increasing burden being placed on organizations feeding the hungry, I think my proposal addresses the more urgent need."

That sentiment is echoed by Patricia Beebe, President & CEO of the Food Bank of Delaware. "A new study by the Food Bank of Delaware reveals that an unprecedented number of Delawareans are seeking food assistance," she said. "The study confirms that 241,600 different people receive emergency food each year through the Food Bank of Delaware. These findings are shocking and very disturbing and represent an increase of 153,200 people annually since our last study was completed in 2006. This very necessary and urgent piece of legislation recognizes the struggle that thousands of Delawareans are facing every day and proposes a very reasonable and doable legislative solution."

HB 307 is currently pending action in the House Health & Human Development Committee.

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