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HARRISBURG, Jan. 7 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca today took the oath of office to begin his 10th term as state assemblyman for Erie's Second Legislative District.

Members of the legislature were sworn into office in ceremonies at the Capitol today that mark the beginning of the 181st Session of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, dating back to the time of Benjamin Franklin who served as an early Speaker of the state House.

In keeping with his long record of legislative activity aimed at local needs, Cappabianca said he would continue to focus his main efforts on improving Erie's economic development and job creation prospects through improvements to the local transportation, education, recreation and cultural resources.

Throughout his career, Cappabianca has been closely identified with local highway and port improvements and with developing the region's education and business strengths, including recreation and tourism.

"In the coming session, I intend to focus my energies much more intensively than ever on matters of direct benefit to constituents and to the city and region," Cappabianca said. "That is one of the advantages of being freed from committee chairmanship responsibilities, which direct one's time and attention to broader, statewide concerns."

###jb/ah

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Ridge budget falls short for Pennsylvania agriculture

HARRISBURG, Feb. 3 -- Gov. Thomas Ridge has again failed to produce any major legislative initiatives for the agricultural community in his state budget proposal, today said House Agricultural and Rural Affairs Committee Democratic Chairman Italo Cappabianca, D-Erie.

According to Cappabianca, Ridge only made token increases to a number of important agricultural line items and eliminated Pennsylvania's Agricultural Loan Forgiveness Program. He also failed to mention or offer significant tax breaks to Pennsylvania farmers.

"One of the most fundamental things we can do for the agricultural community and our state is to give property tax relief to Pennsylvania farmers," Cappabianca said. "Governor Ridge continues to refuse to discuss local property tax reduction, which is the No. 1 concern of our local citizens."

Although \$500,000 was appropriated for agricultural research, there is no increase for the Pennsylvania Animal Health Commission.

"Three-fourths of all agricultural revenue comes from animal agriculture," Cappabianca said. "Pennsylvania has suffered serious animal disease problems like the recent outbreak of Avian Influenza. Maintaining animal health is vital and Pennsylvania needs more help in controlling and researching animal disease."

Cappabianca also noted that the \$100,000 appropriated for food safety inspections in schools and day care establishments was a hard-fought battle for the House Agriculture Committee.

"Just one year ago, this administration opposed the state-supported inspection of food safety in our schools," Cappabianca said. "I'm glad to see the governor changed his mind."

Although \$50,000 has been allocated in the budget to improve pesticide safety in Pennsylvania, Cappabianca said that the Ridge administration opposes legislation that would give parents the right to know when pesticides are being sprayed in their child's school.

Cappabianca also noted that the proposed budget offers a \$5 million increase for Pennsylvania tourism, but only \$400,000 is appropriated for agricultural programs.

"This does not seem to fit," Cappabianca said. "Tourism is the No. 2 industry in Pennsylvania. Agriculture is No. 1!"

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Among the other modest appropriations for agriculture are \$4,000 for 4-H club shows and \$5,000 for Future Farmers. There is no increase in support for Pennsylvania's agricultural fairs.

Ridge's predecessor, Robert P. Casey, made great strides in developing and promoting agricultural initiatives, Cappabianca said.

"Under the Casey administration, the Animal Health Commission produced a state-of-the-art Animal Health Laboratory and formulated the largest farmland preservation program in the world," Cappabianca said.

"This administration does not seem to understand the importance of Pennsylvania's No. 1 commodity."

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CAPPABIANCA PRAISES PLAN FOR SELF-EMPLOYMENT AID

HARRISBURG, Feb. 4 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca today lauded Gov. Tom Ridge for including in his state budget proposal a program of self-employment assistance Cappabianca has championed in recent years.

The program would enable those receiving unemployment compensation payments to pursue opportunities for self-employment without jeopardizing their jobless benefits. In his annual budget address to the General Assembly today, Ridge proposed a \$1.5 million demonstration program for self-employment assistance, to be expanded if the effort proves successful on a pilot basis.

"Having introduced legislation on this concept in the last two sessions, and having had many discussions on it with the governor's top labor officials, I'm delighted the administration has adopted this form of assistance and included it in the budget," said Cappabianca.

"It often happens that people who are 'downsized' out of a job have the ability to succeed in their own businesses but are deterred by the prospect of losing their eligibility for unemployment benefits. Who knows how many small business start-ups have been thwarted because of a matter like this that can easily be corrected?"

Cappabianca said he plans to introduce his bill on self-employment assistance again this year and hopes it can become the vehicle to implement the program throughout the state.

Much of the governor's budget address dealt with economic development and tax assistance to small businesses and low-income families, themes Cappabianca said he welcomes and supports.

###jb/b

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HARRISBURG, Feb. 18 -- Appointed Democratic chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, state Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca said he would use the post to promote the Erie region's stake in agriculture-related businesses and to strengthen the consumer protection functions of the Agriculture Dept.

"I'm looking forward to this new and challenging assignment," said Cappabianca, who had previously served as majority and minority chairman of the House Intergovernmental Affairs Committee.

"Even in my former chairmanship, I was involved with agriculture concerns when my committee looked into the NAFTA agreement and its impacts on Pennsylvania industries, including farming and agribusiness.

"Agriculture and its related activities comprise the number one industry in the state, and it's a major factor in the economy of northwest Pennsylvania. While I have a good deal to learn, I look forward to mastering the issues the committee deals with and working to maintain agriculture's leading role in the state's economy."

Cappabianca said the committee also oversees a variety of programs administered by the Agriculture Department which involve consumer protection and other concerns affecting most state residents. These include food safety, weights and measures, milk pricing, animal health, racing commissions, dog law enforcement and amusement ride safety.

As Democratic chairman, Cappabianca is responsible for coordinating the positions of House Democrats on agricultural issues. His appointment carries with it several other board appointments set by state law.

He has a statutory voting right on the following:

- Agriculture and Rural Youth Development Board, which awards grants to youth organizations such as 4-H and Future Farmers of America;
- State Agricultural Land Preservation Board, which oversees the state's farmland preservation program;
- Animal Health and Diagnostic Commission, which allocates money for animal health research and diagnostic functions;
- Food Employee Certification Advisory Board, which reviews and recommends programs to ensure adequate food safety training of supervisory employees of restaurants, grocery stores and food processing plants;

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➤ Board of Sustainable Agriculture, which reviews grant and loan applications and makes recommendations in order to encourage sustainable agriculture.

Cappabianca also is a nonvoting, ex-officio member of the Agricultural Advisory Board to the State Department of Environmental Protection. This group provides comments on the impact of DEP's regulations and policies on the agricultural community.

The Erie representative is also a nonvoting, ex-officio member of the Board of Overseers of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine.

###jb

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Cappabianca bats two for three on budget amendments

HARRISBURG, March 25 -- The state House this week accepted two amendments out of three proposed for the state budget by Rep. Italo Cappabianca, D-Erie.

The House voted 102-96 to restore \$500,000 in state funds for the Erie-Western Port Authority, returning the appropriation to the \$2 million figure in the 1997-98 budget.

Cappabianca and the other members of the Erie delegation had launched a bipartisan effort to get the funds restored.

The 1997-98 additional funding had financed capital improvements that resulted in Metro Machines Ship Yard being able to secure a \$15 million shipbuilding contract with the Navy.

"Pennsylvania has taken great strides to again be an important factor in the world maritime trade," said Cappabianca. "Port authority funds for Pittsburgh and Philadelphia weren't reduced in the governor's budget proposal and we want to ensure that the solid progress we've achieved in Erie remains a priority in the state's economic goals."

The House unanimously accepted a second Cappabianca amendment that would require that the advisory committee to the state Emergency Food Assistance Program establish guidelines in determining where food assistance is needed most. The guidelines would have to be in place prior to the spending of the \$4 million for emergency food programs included in the proposed state budget.

Cappabianca's amendment would mandate that the resulting guidelines be published in the Pennsylvania Bulletin.

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"Studies have indicated that those needing help are getting poorer, so the level of help needed is greater," said Cappabianca. "This will place an increasing burden on our food banks and food assistance network.

"My amendment would ensure that the money intended to enhance our delivery of emergency food assistance is well spent. We owe it to the taxpayers and to the people whom this program is intended to assist."

A third Cappabianca amendment, which was defeated 71-127, would have increased funding for the state Department of Education for osteopathic education programs.

The increased funding would have been achieved by reducing money earmarked for the Senate Republican and Democratic leadership operational accounts as well as the House Republican and Democratic legislative management committees.

Cappabianca has championed the Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine since its inception to obtain additional funding for the facility and its educational programs.

LECOM trains primary care physicians who specialize in family care, pediatrics, internal medicine and obstetrics and gynecology. Almost two-thirds of its students are from Pennsylvania.

"I will continue to pursue the increase in state funding for LECOM and already have approached my colleagues in the Senate where the budget bill will be coming up for consideration next," said Cappabianca. "LECOM is too important to Erie and to Pennsylvania as a whole to give up the effort."

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HARRISBURG, April 2 --State Rep. Italo Cappabianca, Democratic chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, reports that several amendments to Pennsylvania's 1997-1998 General Fund budget will help ensure the viability of Pennsylvania's No. 1 industry, agriculture.

One of the amendments, A0516, which was sponsored by Cappabianca, would double the appropriation for the state's Future Farmers of America program from \$50,000 to \$100,000.

Cappabianca explained that the current \$50,000 FFA appropriation has allowed the program to support activities such as the Legislative Leadership Conference, the Made for Excellence personal development conference and career development team competitions in more than 20 skill areas, including public speaking, salesmanship, animal judging and others.

Cappabianca noted that this additional funding could be used to promote agricultural education and the FFA program, develop promotional materials that focus on the agricultural industry in general as well as agricultural education and the FFA, increase the allocated funds for state FFA officers to travel to and provide outreach educational opportunities in school districts that either do not have FFA programs or have declining enrollment, or promote Pennsylvania agricultural opportunities and agricultural commodities.

Another agriculture-related amendment, A0530, would restore funding for the Agriculture Department's Organic Food Program in the amount of \$33,000.

"Organic foods have developed quite a following in the last few years," Cappabianca said. "As a matter of fact, there is a large market for organic soybeans, for which farmers receive three times the prices than for inorganic soybeans. Clearly, our farmers need our support to develop foods for the consumer who wants organic food and is willing to pay the difference."

Another agriculture-related amendment adopted by the House, A0517, would increase the appropriation for the Department of Community and Economic Development's Rural Leadership Program by \$100,000.

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The Pennsylvania Rural Leadership program helps develop community leaders with the skills and resources to meet the challenges of Pennsylvania's changing rural communities. Participants come from various backgrounds, including farming, homemaking, business and local chambers of commerce. The first year of the program emphasizes resolving local, regional and state issues, while the second year focuses on national and international issues. Additional funding for RULE would enable more future leaders to tap into the benefits that this program offers both the individual and the Commonwealth.

Cappabianca also supported the adoption of another agriculture-related amendment, A0518, which would require the state Agriculture Department to conduct an economic impact assessment of the state's dairy industry in light of recent federal government actions.

"The recent federal farm bill, in essence, deregulated the prices that farmers can charge for milk, making the basic formula price for milk much more responsive to supply and demand," Cappabianca said. "This means that consumers may see the price of milk fluctuate more drastically than it has previously. This economic impact assessment will help determine the impact that the federal law has had on Pennsylvania dairy farmers."

"I am pleased that these amendments were included in the final budget bill that passed the House," Cappabianca said. "I urge the Senate and the governor to keep these amendments in the budget to help ensure a strong future for agriculture in Pennsylvania."

###mh/k

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HARRISBURG, April 3 -- The following is a column by state Rep. Italo Cappabianca, D-Erie, regarding his recent appointment as Democratic chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee. You may publish this article at your earliest convenience.

###mh/b

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By the time you read this column today, you've almost certainly been affected by Pennsylvania agriculture and the state Department of Agriculture -- and I don't just mean the eggs on your plate, the cream in your coffee or the milk on your cereal. Pennsylvania agriculture is far more than just cows and plows.

Some political pundits had a field day with my appointment as Democratic chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, especially since my district is urban, not rural. Those who find it amusing demonstrate their ignorance of the impact agriculture has on the state of Pennsylvania and of the duties of the state Department of Agriculture.

Agriculture is the No. 1 industry in Pennsylvania and we have the largest rural population of any state in the nation. There is not a citizen in this state who isn't affected by agriculture or by the Agriculture Department. My committee that oversees that department. I'm thrilled to have this opportunity to be involved with it.

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Obviously, the department is hugely involved in Pennsylvania farming -- but its responsibilities go far beyond.

When you buy gas, it's the Department of Agriculture that oversees inspection of the pump to make sure that when you pay for a gallon, you receive exactly that.

When you buy a pound of cheese or Lebanon bologna at the supermarket, we make sure you get what you pay for there, too. And when you get to the checkout line and the cashier slides your items past the scanner, it's the Department of Agriculture that conducts the inspections to make sure the scanner is accurate.

Add restaurant inspections, horse racing (including off-track betting), involvement with food banks, ice cream stands, dairies, nurseries, bakeries, fairs, insect control, lawn care and dog control to the list of entities regulated by the Department of Agriculture.

Want to talk finances? The Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee is also heavily involved in legislation dealing with tax assessments, property tax reform, farmland preservation, rural economic development and promoting Pennsylvania products internationally.

Just recently, the American Farmland Trust released a study that identified Erie County as one of the most vulnerable areas of the state to loss of irreplaceable farmland. If that doesn't concern the residents of the city of Erie, then they've figured out a way to live without eating.

Education? The Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee will be dealing with that, too -- whether it's advocating for education equity and rural post-secondary education or encouraging youth and adult involvement in 4-H programs which have contributed so greatly to Pennsylvania's well-being and heritage. The Agriculture Department also is responsible for setting standards and monitoring the application of pesticides on school property to ensure that our children's health is properly safeguarded.

There's a strong likelihood that over the next two years, the committee will be engaged in proposals to establish a bottle deposit program in this state to reduce the amount of landfill space used each year and to clean up roadside litter.

But still, one might contend that because my district has next-to-zero farmland, I should not be directly involved with setting rural and agricultural policies. Wrong again.

I'm proud of the fact that we have members of the Democratic Caucus who are from urban areas who see a common link between the problems of rural communities and those of the inner cities. They're ready to work together to tackle these challenges.

Rep. John Myers of Philadelphia has nothing larger than community gardens and not a cow in his district, yet he sought to be on the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee. He wants to improve the quantity, freshness and availability of meats, produce and other agricultural products in urban communities and encourage farmers to market their goods at an increased number of farmers' markets in the cities. We're going to work to get food processing companies to look at vacant commercial structures in inner-city neighborhoods, give the buildings new life as processing facilities and provide jobs for Pennsylvanians.

It is equally important to encourage rural communities to reach out to our cities to find common ground and work together to achieve common goals.

So, don't talk to me about any supposed limitations that I, as an urban chairman of the Agriculture Committee may have, because I'm focused on the **unlimited** potential it has to benefit every resident of this Commonwealth.

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Cappabianca blasts governor's firing of Agriculture Secretary Brosius

HARRISBURG, April 11 -- State Rep. Italo Cappabianca, D-Erie, expressed his strong opposition to this week's forced resignation of state Secretary of Agriculture Charles Brosius by Gov. Thomas Ridge.

"I strenuously object to the firing of Secretary Brosius for a number of reasons," said Cappabianca, Democratic chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee. "I've served as a state representative during three different governors' administrations, and have gotten to know many cabinet secretaries. Charles Brosius is one of the most respected, intelligent and able administration officials I and my fellow legislators have met.

"Further, Secretary Brosius and his staff have always been available to me and to the legislators on the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee to respond to all of our questions and concerns about agriculture. He has truly been outstanding.

"Finally, I think it unwise to remove someone like Charles Brosius, who clearly is dedicated to Pennsylvania's farmers, and replace him with someone who may be less committed to farmers' interests."

Cappabianca also signed a letter of protest from House Democratic leadership, members of the agriculture committee and rank-and-file legislators to Ridge, expressing dismay over Brosius' firing.

"Those of us who have come to know and work with Secretary Brosius have found him to be one of the more forthright, honorable and qualified members of your administration," the letter stated. "He has represented our No. 1 industry with distinction, leading the Department of Agriculture in a progressive and nonpartisan way.

"We have worked hard and pride ourselves on our efforts to keep the consideration of agricultural issues in the House of Representatives a nonpartisan exercise. The blatant political firing of an important agricultural leader is, therefore, very disturbing. We have no choice but to conclude that you have put politics before the rural and farm people of this Commonwealth."

"This is a sad day for the Commonwealth," Cappabianca said. "To fire a qualified man like Charles Brosius for no good reason says that Governor Ridge is more concerned about politics than about farmers."

###mh/b

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HARRISBURG, April 11 -- State Rep. Italo Cappabianca, Democratic chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, this week urged the Pennsylvania Milk Marketing Board to take the necessary steps to halt fluctuating milk prices caused by the 1995 U.S. Farm Bill.

Cappabianca asked the board to extend the 30-cent add-on to the base 50-cent over-order premium for the price of milk to help stabilize the price dairy farmers receive for milk and milk products.

"Pennsylvania's dairy farmers are in real trouble these days," Cappabianca said. "They're hurting because of a convoluted federal pricing system that is as hard to understand as it appears easy to manipulate. Economic volatility has caused extreme changes in the Basic Formula Price for milk and a near 25 percent decrease in the last several months of 1996. The BFP has risen only slightly since then.

"JFK once said that the American farmer may be the only businessman who buys retail and sells wholesale," Cappabianca told the board. "Apparently, that hasn't changed much because dairy farmers' production costs have remained high, even in the face of dramatic shifts in the BFP."

With Cappabianca's help, the House in February unanimously adopted H.R. 45, which calls on the U.S. Department of Agriculture to "initiate all action necessary to ensure a more stable and predictable Basic Formula Price, and further, to review the use of the National Cheese Exchange price in the Basic Formula Price calculations." Cappabianca said he was pleased to note that a new cash exchange for cheese on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange will soon replace the NCE.

"I believe we should do more for our dairy farmers and agriculture in general," Cappabianca said. "The Federal Government must continue to do its job and, in Harrisburg, we must do our part to provide some stability for Pennsylvania's 11,000 dairy farmers.

"Pennsylvania's dairy farmers have come to rely on a standard Basic Formula Price in order to provide a quality product to consumers. I will do all I can to help our dairy farmers get a fair and consistent price for their products."

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Erie Democrats have health insurance information for kids

HARRISBURG, Oct. 16 -- State Reps. Tom Scrimenti, Linda Bebko-Jones and Italo Cappabianca have brochures in their district offices about health insurance for children of all income levels.

Brochures on the Children's Health Insurance Program and other low-cost insurance programs are free to the public.

CHIP, funded through a 3-cent-per-pack cigarette tax, provides health insurance for children whose families cannot afford private insurance but whose income is too high to qualify them for Medical Assistance. CHIP operates on a strictly income-based and first-come, first-served basis. Parents can reach CHIP at 800-KIDS-105.

"Pennsylvania may get federal funds to expand CHIP, so we think it's important to get people the information they need to sign up," said Scrimenti. The Erie Democrats will hold CHIP sign-up days in their district offices next month.

Gov. Thomas Ridge capped CHIP in 1995, so while many thousands of children qualify, many are on waiting lists. Thirty-nine children are on the waiting list in Erie County.

Nonetheless, parents should register their children because spaces become available when the eligibility status of kids in the program changes -- they may become too old for CHIP, move, get private insurance or become eligible for Medical Assistance.

Children on the waiting list are eligible for reduced-cost insurance. For \$50 a month per child (plus a \$5 copayment for prescriptions), families can get all the benefits of CHIP.

"We realize that \$50 a month is a lot of money to a poor family, but the program does its best to get kids off the list and into CHIP as soon as possible," said Bebko-Jones.

Because there is a waiting list, Cappabianca emphasized how important it is that parents call the 800 number when they move or get private insurance so that kids on the waiting list can get insurance.

"Remember too that if your children are in CHIP in Erie, and you move within Pennsylvania, they won't lose their benefits. Call CHIP, and they'll help you make arrangements," said Cappabianca.

The Caring Foundation of Highmark Blue Cross/Blue Shield, which administers CHIP, also has a new children's health insurance program for families who make too much to qualify for CHIP.

The new Kids Only Direct Pay Program focuses on a new at-risk population of kids without insurance. A recent study by the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children found that the fastest growing population of children without insurance is among families whose income is 300 percent or more of the federal poverty level. A family of four at 300 percent of the federal poverty level makes \$37,718 a year.

"Many families who make \$40,000 a year don't have insurance for the children through their employers and cannot afford expensive private health insurance," explained Scrimenti.

This new program is much less expensive -- \$96.55 a month for one child, \$193.15 a month for two children and \$265.55 a month for three or more kids.

"There's no reason your children should not have health insurance," said Cappabianca. "Call the Caring Foundation, and they'll find a program for you."

Bebko-Jones said the aforementioned federal funds are not a given.

"The onus is upon the Ridge administration to meet all deadlines to make sure Pennsylvania remains eligible for \$600 million in federal funds to support CHIP," said Bebko-Jones.

Pennsylvania must invest \$26 million to get the federal money, which would provide 80,000 more children in the Commonwealth with health insurance. Pennsylvania would receive the additional funding over the next five years.

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Agricultural and rural project grants available to youth groups

HARRISBURG, Nov. 25 -- State Rep. Italo Cappabianca, D-Erie, today announced that more than \$251,000 in state grant money is available to youth organizations to fund projects that increase awareness of agricultural and rural issues in Pennsylvania.

"The projects that young people around the state are able to undertake thanks to these grants are very important," Cappabianca said. "They give our youth a new knowledge and appreciation for rural and agricultural issues and ensure a successful future for agriculture in Pennsylvania."

Cappabianca said the Agriculture and Rural Youth Organization Grant Program awards direct and matching grants to youth organizations in Pennsylvania that promote development in the areas of agriculture, rural community leadership, vocational training or peer fellowship. The program awards direct grants up to \$2,500. Groups are eligible to receive one direct grant and/or one matching grant in each calendar year.

"Agriculture and Rural Youth Organization grants are awarded on a competitive basis based on a project's relevance to agricultural or rural issues, project innovation, the value of a project to the community, and the impact of the project on youth across Pennsylvania," he said.

Direct grants are awarded for educational programs, field trips, safety training programs, equipment purchases and capital projects related to agriculture and rural issues. Matching grants are available to pay for capital projects and equipment purchases.

The deadline for applications is Dec. 5, 1997. For more information about the Agriculture and Rural Youth Organization Grant Program and an application contact the Department of Agriculture's Region I office in Meadville at 814-332-6890.

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Farmers sought to assist with food program

HARRISBURG, Feb. 18 -- State Rep. Italo Cappabianca, Democratic chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, is notifying farmers who take part in farmers' markets that the state Department of Agriculture is seeking participation in its Farmers Market Nutrition Program.

According to Cappabianca, the program provides fresh fruits and vegetables to Pennsylvanians enrolled in the state's Women, Infants and Children program. Eligibility for the nutrition program is limited to pregnant and nursing women and children 3 through 4. Lists of participating farmers' markets and program vouchers are distributed to eligible WIC recipients for purchasing fresh produce between July 1 and Oct. 31.

"The Farmers' Market Nutrition Program has a dual purpose," Cappabianca said. "It promotes better health for people who often cannot afford fresh fruits and vegetables and it creates additional sales for Pennsylvania farmers."

Cappabianca commented that nearly 450 vendors at 300 market sites participated in the program last year, generating about \$1.5 million in sales for Pennsylvania farmers.

A survey of 460 WIC recipients who used nutrition program money showed that 44 percent visited a farmers' market for the first time, 42 percent learned a new way to prepare fresh fruits and vegetables and 90 percent found that the quality of produce was as good as or better than their regular grocery store.

"The program has grown significantly since it was first introduced in 1988," Cappabianca said. "It served only two counties then, but now benefits nearly 100,000 recipients in all 67 counties."

Farmers who wish to participate in this year's Farmers' Market Nutrition Program can obtain applications by calling the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Food Distribution at 1-800-468-2433.

Deadline for applications is March 31.

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Amendment would provide better oversight of pollution monitoring

HARRISBURG, March 20 -- Calling them misguided and inaccurate, House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Democratic Chairman Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, today responded to criticisms by the state Department of Environment Protection regarding his proposed 1998-99 budget amendment to provide more legislative oversight for citizen volunteer monitoring programs.

According to Cappabianca, the amendment to prohibit DEP from expending government funds for residents to monitor pollution activities would protect Pennsylvanians from receiving potentially inaccurate data on air, land and water pollution.

"I am concerned that DEP is attempting to disregard its responsibility to Pennsylvanians," Cappabianca said. "To continue to protect Pennsylvania's environment, we must make sure that quality and accurate information is being utilized, collected and evaluated by the proper authority."

Cappabianca noted that DEP Secretary James Seif has said that data collected by citizen volunteers may be used by municipalities to guide environmental management policies without department oversight.

"I am a strong supporter of the importance of water quality and environmental protection and of the citizens groups that try to make Pennsylvania free of pollution through their vigil. My uncertainty is that the department will not ensure that organizations or agencies will view the data with the proper level of skepticism."

By providing legislative oversight of citizen volunteer monitoring programs, the liability to landowners could be addressed and quality data guidelines could be established.

Cappabianca noted that House Democrats always have been proponents of air, land and water quality and have recognized the importance of DEP's statutory responsibility to ensure that Pennsylvanians have access to clean, safe and quality resources.

"It is not the integrity of House Democrats that is in question," Cappabianca said. "Environmental supporters themselves have called this administration's environmental policies the worst in Pennsylvania's recent history."

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"The Ridge administration is notorious for circumventing legislative intent without notifying or seeking input from the General Assembly, and this is just another example," Cappabianca remarked.

Cappabianca's amendment is expected to be voted next week by the House.

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Cappabianca views House approval of tax bill as hasty

HARRISBURG, April 30 -- Stating that it fails to address the need for meaningful tax reform, state Rep. Italo Cappabianca, D-Erie, Wednesday night voted against the Senate version of a tax bill that would allow local school districts to shift their tax reliance from residential property taxes to earned income taxes.

Cappabianca said he voted against the measure because Erie County likely will not benefit from its provisions. Under the bill, school districts that receive voter approval could assess an earned income tax of up to 1.5 percent if they use the money first to eliminate all nuisance taxes, like the occupational privilege tax, and then to reduce property taxes. To Cappabianca's dismay, city, county and municipal governments were excluded from the bill.

"The city of Erie cannot afford to be excluded from this tax revenue," Cappabianca said. "Local governments rely heavily on property taxes to sustain operations and this bill would only cripple the already eroding tax base in the city."

Cappabianca said the provision to provide some \$25 million in tax credits to help subsidize four counties with school districts on the outskirts of Philadelphia that opt into the earned income tax shift is unfair to the rest of the state.

"Erie residents and other Pennsylvania taxpayers will be forced to provide additional revenue to some of the richest people and school districts in our state," said Cappabianca. "I find this unconstitutional and offensive to the hard-working people of Pennsylvania."

Cappabianca also said he was not happy with the way that the leaders of the Republican-controlled House and Senate pushed through the 80-page bill without providing Democrats an opportunity to review its implications or provide amendments to improve it.

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"The Republicans have once again given us only a few hours to review this bill and decide on a vote," said Cappabianca. "I had little time to work out the numbers or speak to my county assessment office and school board members about how the bill will impact the Erie School District. There was no valid reason to push it through Wednesday."

According to Cappabianca, the bill should have allowed school districts the option of levying a personal income tax or an earned income tax instead of providing for the earned income tax only.

"What we are left with in this bill is that a person would pay taxes on money earned through working, but could not be taxed on income from investments," Cappabianca said. "Restricting the tax shift to earned income only would force middle- and low-income working families to carry the heaviest burden in funding our school districts."

Cappabianca also said he was displeased that the bill allowed no provisions for the thousands of Pennsylvanians who rent homes and apartments and are faced with higher rent bills to help compensate landlords for their property taxes.

Cappabianca supports a Democratic proposal to reduce residential property taxes by 50 percent over the next five years by using Pennsylvania's natural revenue growth. Democrats attempted to offer the amendment to the bill that would have provided this relief, but it was rejected by a narrow margin.

"With a state budget surplus that will probably hit the \$500 million mark for the third year in a row, we could have given every homeowner and renter in Pennsylvania a tax credit," said Cappabianca. "It is a shame we were not given the opportunity, but I will continue to fight for meaningful reform."

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Legislation would provide Erie an option for food protection codes

HARRISBURG, June 3 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, today introduced legislation to allow Erie County to adopt a food protection ordinance based on the latest Food and Drug Administration recommendations made for municipalities.

Cappabianca said the measure (H.B. 2682) is necessary because the Erie County Department of Health is prohibited from adopting a modern food code due to the state's home rule charter statute that specifically forbids the adoption of any ordinance not identical to Commonwealth law.

"This legislation will provide home rule counties that have health departments the same opportunity to adopt the latest food protection laws as do counties that are not home rule," Cappabianca said.

Cappabianca added that Erie's home rule status has forced the county to rely on Commonwealth food and beverage laws that were enacted in 1945. The current regulations that Erie is constrained to use were written in 1971.

"This legislation would allow Erie to adopt food protection regulations which are the latest of their kind," said Cappabianca. "Although the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture is working on adopting new guidelines based on FDA recommendations, this measure would provide the Erie Department of Health a quicker option."

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Cappabianca amendment would honor former state representative

HARRISBURG, June 8 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, today announced that the House unanimously voted to include in a Senate bill an amendment that would dedicate a section of the Bay Front Parkway in Erie County to the memory of the late Bernard J. Dombrowski.

Cappabianca sponsored the amendment that would designate the Bay Front Parkway from State Street east to Wayne Street south to the intersection of Bird Drive and East Grandview Boulevard as the Bernard (Bennie) J. Dombrowski Memorial Highway. Dombrowski served as state representative for the 1st Legislative District from 1970 to 1990.

"Bennie was a committed community servant and a good friend and colleague for many years," Cappabianca said. "This dedication would serve as a faithful reminder of his devotion to Erie, his beloved East side and to all Pennsylvania residents."

Road signs that display the name of Bernard (Bennie) J. Dombrowski would be erected at the beginning and end of the designated section of highway and be maintained by the Department of Transportation.

Cappabianca's amendment was included in a Senate bill that would designate a route in Cumberland County as the American Ex-Prisoners of War Highway.

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Cappabianca votes in favor of COLA bill

HARRISBURG, June 8 -- State Rep. Italo Cappabianca, D-Erie, today voted for a bill that would grant a cost-of-living increase to retired state workers and public school employees.

Cappabianca said the House, by a 185-1 vote, overwhelmingly passed the bill that would provide increases ranging from 1.86 percent for employees who retired in the 1996-97 fiscal year up to 25 percent for those who retired before 1969.

"This increase will mark the first time in more than four years that retired state and school employees will receive an adjustment to their annuity payments," Cappabianca said. "These employees served Pennsylvania residents for many years and are certainly in need of this cost-of-living increase."

The bill (S.B. 1269) goes to Gov. Thomas Ridge for his signature.

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State grants help community conservation, recreation efforts

HARRISBURG, Aug. 24 -- State Rep. Italo Cappabianca, D-Erie, reminds local governments and nonprofit organizations that state grant funding for community improvement projects is available through the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

According to Cappabianca, organizations and municipalities can apply for the state aid to help in community conservation and enhancement efforts for area parks and forests, recreational facilities, historical sites, libraries and zoos.

"Some \$11 million is now available through the Keystone Recreation, Park and Conservation Fund," Cappabianca said. "I encourage any nonprofit or local government group that has an idea or plan to enhance our community to apply for this funding as soon as possible."

Cappabianca said grants could be used to help plan, acquire, improve or develop local park and recreation facilities, help develop rail-trail corridors and assist in the development or implementation of river enhancement and river conservation projects.

The deadline for submitting an application is Oct. 30.

More information on the Key '93 Fund can be obtained by calling Cappabianca's district office at 453-7639. Applicants also may write DCNR, Bureau of Recreation and Conservation, P.O. Box 8475, Harrisburg, PA 17105-8475, or call 717-783-2656.

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Brochures can help consumers make best choice

HARRISBURG, Aug. 25 -- Residents who are selected for Pennsylvania's second round of electric choice could benefit from a brochure that details the program, according to state Rep. Italo Cappabianca, D-Erie.

According to Cappabianca, the brochure answers some of the most commonly asked questions about the Commonwealth's new Electric Choice Program and about choosing an electricity supplier. Copies of the brochure are available in his district office.

"This brochure can help consumers learn as much as possible about Pennsylvania's new law regarding electric choice so they can make an informed decision when it comes time to choose a supplier," Cappabianca said. "I encourage anyone who is unsure or has questions about the program to pick up a copy of this brochure."

The electric choice brochure is available in Cappabianca's district office at 1216 W. 26th St. in Erie.

More information on the program can be found on the PUC's special Internet site at <http://www.electrichoice.com>, or by calling the PUC's electric choice toll-free hotline at 1-888-782-3228.

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State can help agriculture graduates repay student loans

HARRISBURG, Sept. 2 -- Applications for Pennsylvania's

Agriculture Education Loan Forgiveness Program are now available through the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, said state Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, Democratic chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee.

According to Cappabianca, the Agriculture Education Loan Forgiveness Program was established by the legislature in 1992 and is designed to help agriculture and veterinary medicine graduates repay their student loans when they stay in Pennsylvania to help operate a family farm or practice veterinary medicine.

Graduates who received loans administered by PHEAA must complete and submit the application by Nov. 16. Personal and commercial loans do not qualify under the program.

"The high cost of education requires today's students to rely heavily on loans to make it through to graduation," Cappabianca said. "This program is a tremendous help to graduates and provides an added incentive for people to stay in Pennsylvania and help our state remain successful and competitive in the agriculture industry."

Cappabianca said that borrowers can receive up to \$2,000 in student loan forgiveness payments for each year they are employed full-time on a family farm, a family farm corporation or in veterinary medicine. Applicants must have a degree related to agriculture or veterinary medicine from a Pennsylvania school or college and are limited to a lifetime maximum of \$10,000 in loan forgiveness payments.

Veterinarians must be certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to sign health certificates required for the interstate commerce of agriculture animals and animal products, and family farms and farm corporations must be owned by members of the immediate family and used for the production of commercial agriculture products.

Applications are available directly from PHEAA by calling 717-720-3600, or through Cappabianca's district office at 1216 W. 26th St., Erie. More information about the program can be found on PHEAA's Internet site at <http://www.pheaa.org>.

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State funding available for rental housing unit developers

HARRISBURG, Sept. 14 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, today announced that the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency will hold a funding availability and application workshop in Erie for residential property developers.

The workshop will be held from 9 a.m. to noon Tuesday, Oct. 20 at the Avalon in Erie. The deadline to register for the workshop is Monday, Sept. 21, and a nonrefundable registration fee of \$10 will be charged for each attendee.

According to Cappabianca, the workshop will highlight the agency's PennHOMES program, which offers interest-free deferred payment loans to support the development of lower-income rental housing units. Funding for the program is reserved for housing development containing five or more units and is available through a number of state and federal resources.

"The workshop will help applicants determine the most appropriate mix of funding resources and will assist developers in preparing their applications, Cappabianca said.

PennHOMES funding applications for rental housing developments in the city of Erie will be accepted from Jan. 1 through March 1. Additional information on the PennHOMES program and October workshop is available through Cappabianca's district office at 453-7639.

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Link-to-Learn grants awarded in Erie City

HARRISBURG, Sept. 23 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, today announced that the Erie City School District and the Erie City Vocational-Technical School have been awarded technology grants through Pennsylvania's Link-to-Learn program.

According to Cappabianca, Erie City School District received \$220,000 and the vocational-technical school received \$38,984 in grant funding. Grant amounts are based on a district's enrollment and state aid ratio.

Under the program, school districts use the money to purchase and upgrade computers, provide professional development to their teachers and to share the technology resources with the community. Community residents can attend computer classes and have access to district computer labs in the evenings.

"The Link-to-Learn program is in its third year and has been very successful in bringing technology to the classroom," said Cappabianca. "These grants are so important for the district so that we may help our teachers, students and members of the community achieve success in this growing field."

Cappabianca said that the 1998-99 Link-to-Learn funding priorities include expanding high-speed connections to wide area networks and the Internet, purchasing educational software to assist teachers with teaching the academic standards and ensuring that districts assess and address computer problems that could occur in 2000.

A total of \$36 million in Link-to-Learn funding was awarded to school districts statewide.

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Residents still can apply for property tax/rent rebates

HARRISBURG, Sept. 23 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, would like to inform residents who qualify for Pennsylvania's Property Tax/Rent Rebate Program that there still is time to complete an application for reimbursement.

According to Cappabianca, the deadline for filing Property Tax and Rent Rebate applications for taxes or rent paid in 1997 was extended from June 30 to Dec. 31. Pennsylvanians eligible for the rebate are seniors 65 and older; widows and widowers 50 and older; and people with disabilities 18 and older. The combined household income cannot exceed \$15,000.

"Under the program, qualified residents can receive rebates up to \$500 based on property taxes or rent paid," Cappabianca said. "This can make such a difference for people living on fixed incomes and struggling to make ends meet. I encourage residents who thought they had missed the original June deadline to apply."

Cappabianca said participants can expect a rebate about 60 days after submitting the application. The program is funded through proceeds from the Pennsylvania Lottery and is administered by the Department of Revenue.

Property Tax/Rent Rebate forms are available in Cappabianca's district office located at 1216 W. 26th St. Questions about specific claims can be directed to the Department of Revenue automated toll-free number, 1-888-PATAXES (1-888-728-2937).

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Cappabianca resolution recognizes German-Americans

HARRISBURG, Sept. 29 -- The Pennsylvania House of Representatives today unanimously adopted a resolution sponsored by state Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, designating Oct. 6 as German-American Day in Pennsylvania.

Cappabianca said Oct. 6 is an ideal day to recognize German-Americans because on that day in 1683, the first group of Germans sailed into Philadelphia Harbor on the ship Concord.

"The first German immigrants who arrived in the United States left behind families and traditions and devoted themselves to America and becoming Americans," Cappabianca said. "Today, more than 60 million Americans trace at least part of their ancestry to Germany, and it is only fitting that we honor them and their contributions to our state and nation on this day."

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Child care workers can apply for student loan forgiveness

HARRISBURG, Oct. 2 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, would like to inform local child care professionals who are repaying student loans that applications for the Early Childhood Education Professional Loan Forgiveness Program are now available.

The deadline for application is Dec. 1.

According to Cappabianca, the program is administered by the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency and repays borrowers of PHEAA-guaranteed student loans up to \$2,500 per year and a lifetime maximum of \$10,000 in loan forgiveness. Program funds are limited to borrowers who financed a degree in the early childhood education field.

"This is a worthwhile program that provides an added incentive for our graduates to stay in the state and help improve the quality of child care for all Pennsylvanians," Cappabianca said.

Cappabianca said the program is funded through an appropriation in the state budget and funding is limited. If the number of applicants exceeds the funds available, PHEAA will select loan forgiveness recipients through a lottery process.

Applicants must be Pennsylvania residents and have a bachelor's degree and Pennsylvania State Early Education Certification (kindergarten through third grade) or an associate's degree in early childhood education or child development. They also must be employed full-time as a child care professional in a Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare-approved child day care center or group day care home as of Sept. 1, 1998. Annual salaries cannot exceed \$18,500.

Applications for the program are available through Cappabianca's district office at 1216 W 26th St., Erie, or by calling PHEAA directly at 717-720-3600. Additional information about the program can be found on the Internet at www.pheaa.org.

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Cappabianca on ball to expedite federal funds for Amtrak station, airport repairs

HARRISBURG, Oct. 6 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, today introduced legislation that would dedicate \$5.4 million in state funding to help expedite federal transportation funds to renovate the Amtrak station at West 14th and Peach streets and refurbish the Erie International Airport.

Cappabianca is asking for the state to contribute \$1.4 million to help renovate Erie's dilapidated Amtrak station and \$4 million to help renovate and rehabilitate the Erie International Airport. He introduced the legislation with the hope of advancing the commitment of federal transportation funds for both projects.

"Congress will not provide the funds to help with these projects until Pennsylvania allocates a portion of the necessary funding in the state capital budget," Cappabianca said. "We cannot afford to let these two worthwhile projects slip away when the federal government has indicated that they are willing to make their contribution."

Cappabianca said some of the projects at the Amtrak station include repairs to the crumbling platform, replacement of burned out lights and the elimination of graffiti covering the walls.

"The Amtrak station has been in need of repair for some time now, and this money would help to provide a more pleasant mode of transportation for Erie residents and visitors to our area," said Cappabianca. "It is incumbent upon this legislature and this administration to act now so the time for federal commitment does not run out."

Cappabianca said his bill, if enacted, would be included as a supplement to Pennsylvania's Capital Budget Transportation Assistance Project Act for 1998-99.

The bill (H.B. 2875) has been referred to the House Transportation Committee for consideration.

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Grants to address watershed pollution problems now available

HARRISBURG, Oct. 13 -- A new state grant program to help community groups with watershed restoration efforts and water pollution projects is now open for application, said state Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca.

According to Cappabianca, the Watershed Restoration and Assistance Program administered by the Department of Environmental Protection is designed to help citizen groups, conservation districts and local governments in their efforts to address urban, suburban and rural watershed pollution problems.

"A total of \$575,000 is available under the program in 1998, and I encourage any interested group to apply as soon as possible," Cappabianca said. "This program is essential in helping community groups work together to improve water quality for residents in our area."

Applications for the current round of funding must be submitted by Oct. 30. Grant awards will be announced around Dec. 1, and approved projects should be completed by June 30.

Cappabianca said grants are available in three categories and include provisions for seed grants of \$100 to \$2,500, small project grants of \$2,501 to \$10,000 or large project grants of \$10,001 to \$50,000. Applicants are encouraged, but not required, to have matching funds.

Additional information about the program is available by calling the Department of Environmental Protection's Bureau of Watershed Conservation at (717) 787-5259. Information and application instructions also can be found on DEP's Web site at www.dep.state.pa.us (choose Subjects/Water Management/watersheds).

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Winter heating assistance available

HARRISBURG, Nov. 13 -- Now that the cold weather is here, state Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, would like to inform Erie's lower-income residents that winter heating assistance is now available through Pennsylvania's Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

According to Cappabianca, LIHEAP helps low-income families pay a portion of their winter heating bills and provides emergency assistance for furnace repairs and unexpected fuel shortages.

Energy assistance grants are based on income, family size, regional cost of living and heating fuel types. The state Department of Public Welfare administers the program and income eligibility limits are based on federal poverty guidelines.

Cappabianca said the cash grant program runs from Nov. 16 through Jan. 8 and the crisis grant program is available through March 15.

"Funds for the program are limited, so I encourage all area residents who feel they may qualify for grant assistance to apply as soon as possible," Cappabianca said. "The program is especially important for senior citizens and families with small children who need to make sure their homes are adequately heated."

Residents who feel they may qualify for LIHEAP should contact the Erie County Assistance Office at 814-461-2000. Additional information about the program is available by calling Cappabianca's district office at 814-453-7639.

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Limited-income residents could qualify for free vision care in March

HARRISBURG, Dec. 31 -- State Rep. Italo S. Cappabianca, D-Erie, is informing Erie residents of the Vision USA project, a program that provides free eye examinations and vision care to limited-income working families in Pennsylvania.

According to Cappabianca, local residents who are in need of vision care may qualify to receive free eye exams and glasses during **Save Your Vision Week, March 7-13.**

To be eligible for the program, applicants must have a job or live in a household where at least one person is working full- or part-time, not have health insurance that covers eye examinations, have an income falling below an established level based on household size, and not have had an eye examination during the past two years.

"Any limited-income resident who does not have access to regular eye care for themselves or their family should look into this program," said Cappabianca. "Individuals must apply in January to establish eligibility and qualified applicants will be assigned to a volunteer optometrist from the community on a first-come basis."

Cappabianca said applicants can register toll-free by calling **1-800-766-4466** from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, Jan. 4-29.

Mail-in application forms must be postmarked by Jan. 22 and are available through local Salvation Army offices, area associations for the blind, or by writing Vision USA at 243 N. Lindbergh Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63141.

Individuals should be able to obtain the income eligibility guidelines by calling the toll-free number or through participating associations. Residents with Internet access also can find information about the program and apply online at www.aoanet.org in the "Meet the AOA" section.

The Vision USA program is sponsored by the Pennsylvania Optometric Association and the Pennsylvania Vision Conservation Institute.

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