

Food Stamp Challenge: 2007 Journal

When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. – Luke 24:30-31

The Food Stamp Program is the first line of defense against hunger in the United States. Each month, it helps put food on the table for more than 25 million Americans—including [number from your state]. That amounts to _____% of the people in [your state].

An estimated _____ households in [your state] live with hunger or the threat of hunger.

Nationally, more than 80% of food stamp benefits go to households with children, many of them in working families.

Half of all Americans will at some point live in a household receiving food stamps.

To be eligible for food stamps, household incomes must be at or below 130 percent of the poverty line, which is \$20,650 for a family of four. People working 40 hours per week for the federal minimum wage qualify for food stamps. But a salary increase of as little as one dollar may push them above the income cutoff for the program.

The average food stamp benefit in [your state] is about \$___ per person per meal (\$___ per month). That modest amount is crucial to families who are financially pressed.

“Food stamps” is really a misnomer. Food Stamp benefits are distributed through a state's Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) system.

When you get food stamps, you will be given an account, like a bank account. You will also get a plastic card called the **[name of card in your state] Card**. You use it the same way someone would buy food with a bankcard or a credit card. Each month, your food stamp benefits are put into your account.

You can use your food stamp card at grocery stores, convenience stores, markets, and co-ops. Sixteen of the 86 farmers' markets throughout the state now accept the **[name of card in your state]**

With the **[name of card in your state]** you can buy any food except pet food or heated foods. You can also buy seeds and plants to grow food, as long as you are buying them from a store that accepts food stamps (like a grocery store).

You cannot use your EBT card to buy soap, toothpaste, toilet paper, vitamins, tobacco, alcohol or anything else that is not food.

There are a few places where you can use food stamp benefits to get prepared meals. The Meals on Wheels Program for the elderly accept the **[name of card in your state]**. If you are elderly, disabled or homeless, and you are living in a place that serves meals, then you can use food stamps to get these meals.

To apply for an the [name of card in your state], you must go to the local [department of social services office name] to fill out an application. The office will give you an appointment for an interview.

Online pre-screening tools can tell you whether you might be eligible for food stamps, and how much you might receive. The minimum benefit for food stamps is \$10. By estimating your benefit amount in advance, you can see whether it would be worth your time to go through the application process.

Sometimes the application process can be daunting, particularly for a working family.

The first day I went to the Food Stamp office it was just before 8 a.m. There were a lot of people waiting and many of us had to stand outside. At 9:30 a.m., one of the workers came out to say, "I'm sorry, we have too many appointments, you have to come back tomorrow. I went back at 7:30 a.m. a few days later with my application filled out. There was another line of people waiting and the same thing happened... I have to drop my son off at 7 a.m., so I can't be there any earlier than 7:30. Unless I get to the food stamp office at 6:30, I won't be able to get an appointment.

This story was told by a woman from Oregon, but the experience is not uncommon in other parts of the country. One state actually has a 44-page application! [Has the process been simplified in your state]?

Research shows that children raised in food insecure households are more likely to require hospitalizations. The average cost of a hospital stay for a single sick child would purchase almost five years of Food Stamps for a family getting the average monthly benefit.

Food Stamp benefits are calculated based on the Thrifty Food Plan, the national standard set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). However, the current plan is not consistent with the most recent dietary recommendations of the Surgeon General.

According to the USDA's own analysis, only one in ten families can get 100% of the recommended daily allowances of key nutrients if they spend no more on food than what is allotted in the Thrifty Food Plan.

All households make decisions about how to maximize their food dollars. To avoid going hungry, they may compromise on the quality of food before reducing its quantity.

Many families manage to avoid actual hunger but still lack the money to buy the healthy, nutritious foods needed for a balanced diet. Low-income families must stretch their food money as far as possible. High calorie, less healthful food provides more energy for the dollar. These foods are easier to fill up on and they cost less than fresh fruits and vegetables.

A model of efficiency

Americans used to hear frequent allegations of food stamp fraud, but the truth is that the Food Stamp Program has achieved a level of integrity that policymakers should want all federal programs to reach.

Food Stamps are funded by the federal government but administered by the states. Auditors assess the accuracy of Food Stamp payments. States that are found to commit too many errors are subject to financial sanctions.

A 2005 federal study found that payment errors are almost negligible—at their lowest level since the program began. Some of the errors are included in the rates are underpayments—people receiving less help than they qualify for.

The Food Stamp Program was one of the most effective “first responders” after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in 2005. The USDA was able to quickly issue millions of dollars in disaster food stamps. More than 900,000 households enrolled in the program in the first month.

Not only does the Food Stamp Program helps recipients, it contributes to local economies.

Nationally, every \$5 in new food stamp benefits generates \$9.20 in total community spending.

Last year the Food Stamp Program pumped \$463,280,260 into the Oregon economy, benefiting farmers, grocers and small businesses throughout the state.

During the Great Depression, the first Food Stamp Program operated by allowing people to buy orange stamps equal to their normal food expenditures; for every \$1 worth of orange stamps purchased, 50 cents worth of blue stamps were received. Orange stamps could only be used to buy food that the USDA considered to be surplus.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy, having seen the debilitating effects of hunger while campaigning in Appalachia, directed the USDA to start a pilot Food Stamp Program. The pilot program still required that the food stamps be purchased, but eliminated the concept of special stamps for surplus foods.

The Food Stamp Program began operating nationwide on July 1, 1974. Participation was almost 14 million people.

In 1977, Congress voted to eliminate purchase requirements on food stamps, opening the program to the poorest people. Up to that point, food stamps could only be purchased with cash—which those most in need had desperately little of.

In July 2004, all 50 states were operating Electronic Benefits Transfer systems to issue food stamp benefits, permanently replacing the paper coupons for which the Food Stamp Program is named. Anachronistic thought it may be, the name has not changed.

Protecting Food Stamps

In a time of tight budgets, legislators find it tempting to cut programs that serve poor people. Before Hurricane Katrina, Congress was proposing that Food Stamps be cut anywhere from \$600 million to \$1.8 billion.

Because the Food Stamp Program is an “entitlement” program, anyone who is eligible under program rules must be offered benefits. If food stamps were a “discretionary” program rather than an entitlement, the availability of food stamps would be limited to a predetermined budget amount.

Since 2002, the House of Representatives has considered bills that would have allowed states to essentially cap funding levels for the Food Stamp Program. That would limit the availability of this crucial safety net—no matter how high the poverty rate rose or how many people needed assistance.

The best way to counter such harmful proposals is through strong and effective advocacy by people of faith and conscience who are also voters. Bread for the World is a Christian organization whose members are motivated by their faith to seek justice.

This year the Food Stamp Program will be reauthorized as part of the Farm Bill. Bread for the World is advocating for improvements to the Food Stamp Program, including:

- Raising the benefit to ensure that families have access to healthy food

- Providing states with more financial support to administer the program & increase participation

Day
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A Place at the Table

Charity is commendable; everyone should be charitable. But justice aims to create a social order in which, if individuals choose not to be charitable, people still don't go hungry, unschooled or sick without care. Charity depends on the vicissitudes of whim and personal wealth; justice depends on commitment instead of circumstance. Faith-based charity provides crumbs from the table; faith-based justice offers a place at the table. *Bill Moyers*

How can you, as a person of faith, and the entire Trinity community sow seeds of justice for hungry people?

As Christians, we are invited into a world where all are fed, no matter how hungry.

Matthew's challenge to us that 'nothing is impossible' demands our wholehearted response--a response that recognizes that as long as some are hungry, none can enjoy true and perfect holiness.

*We cannot speak much in the way of good news to people who are starving or dying of preventable diseases. We must begin by **doing** good news with those who are most vulnerable. In and through both, God is glorified, and all creation can begin to experience the shalom for which we were created.*

~ Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori,
Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church

Sources:

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