

MPRnews

Food stamp benefits cut goes into effect, but some want even deeper trim

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — Minnesotans who receive food stamps are about to receive less money each month for groceries.

A temporary boost to the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program passed by Congress as part of the 2009 economic stimulus package expires Friday, forcing some low-income Minnesotans to look for ways to fill the gap.

Exactly how much each family will lose depends on circumstances. For example, a family of four will receive \$36 less each month. The average drop in benefits regardless of family size will be 7 percent, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a think-tank that studies poverty.

Some Minnesota families already are worried. For two weeks, phones have been ringing at the St. Paul offices of the Minnesota Food HelpLine, which many food stamp recipients have turned to for help.

Armed with maps and lists of places that offer free food, Myriah Myers and Abbie Tish refer callers to food shelves that can help them, including some that offer transportation. They also recommend discount food programs and other food assistance, such as the federal Women, Infants and Children program.

Myers said the influx of calls started shortly after the state sent out a letter to everyone who receives food stamps, alerting them that benefits would soon fall. "The majority of the people that we talk to are scared," she said.

Many are afraid they won't have enough to feed themselves or their families when benefits drop - even if it is only \$10 or so.

"They say, 'That's my whole months' budget for milk,'" Myers said, "or 'That's all I would use per month for bread, and where am I supposed to get that now?'"

Usually, Myers knows where to send them. But sometimes people are already using the available resources -- or live in rural areas where there's no help close by.

"Sometimes there's really not a lot that we can do," she said. "Sometimes it's really just a matter of comforting people and saying, 'I know it's hard, and it sounds exhausting to be in your position, but there's really nothing else that we can do.'"

To many, the cut in grocery money may not sound like much, said Colleen Moriarty, executive director of Hunger Solutions Minnesota, which runs the Minnesota Food HelpLine.

But she said, "Thirty-six dollars, out of a very limited budget, when there's no wiggle room, is a lot of money."

Moriarty anticipates more people will turn to food shelves, which are already seeing record-high demand.

State Department of Human Services Commissioner Lucinda Jesson agreed.

It is a bad time for the benefit boost to expire, said Jesson, whose department administers the food stamp program in Minnesota.

"The economy is getting better, but we have more Minnesotans who are struggling to put food on the table today than we have had any time in the past 20 years, when the federal government started measuring this," she said. "The benefits of the economy haven't reached everyone."

There are now 537,000 people on food stamps in Minnesota, double the number in 2007. Nationwide, the cost of the program has more than doubled since 2008, to almost \$80 billion per year.

That's drawn attention from critics of federal spending, among them Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst at the conservative Cato Institute. DeHaven, who said the food stamp program should shrink, notes that the temporary hike in food stamp benefits was intended to expire.

"There's an old saying that there's nothing more permanent than a temporary government program," he said. "Now as a budget analyst and studying the history of government programs, many, many, many things started off as temporary. And that's kind of the nature of government."

DeHaven wants to see the federal government out of the business of food stamps altogether -- leaving food assistance to local governments or charities.

There is one thing everyone in this story agrees on: Today's cuts may be just the beginning.

U.S. House and Senate negotiators this week began work on the farm bill, which funds food stamps. The GOP-controlled House wants to cut the \$80 billion program by an additional \$4 billion annually. The Senate bill would make a smaller cut to food assistance - about \$400 million a year.

WHAT \$36 BUYS

Here's what a shopper could pay for with the food stamp benefit that will be cut from a family of four at Rainbow Foods in Minneapolis earlier this week.

8 apples

6 bananas

1 head of broccoli

1 bag of baby carrots

4 chicken breasts

2 loaves of bread

1 jar of peanut butter

2 cans of vegetable soup

1 box of cereal

1 dozen eggs