

NEW YORK POST

NY food stamp recipients are shipping welfare-funded groceries to relatives in Jamaica, Dominican Republic and Haiti

By: Kate Briquetelet and Isabel Vincent- July 21, 2013

Food stamps are paying for trans-Atlantic takeout — with New Yorkers using taxpayer-funded benefits to ship food to relatives in Jamaica, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Welfare recipients are buying groceries with their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards and packing them in giant barrels for the trip overseas, The Post found.

The practice is so common that hundreds of 45- to 55-gallon cardboard and plastic barrels line the walls of supermarkets in almost every Caribbean corner of the city.

The feds say the moveable feasts go against the intent of the \$86 billion welfare program for impoverished Americans.

A spokeswoman for the US Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service said welfare benefits are reserved for households that buy and prepare food together. She said states should intervene if people are caught shipping nonperishables abroad.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, called it just another example of welfare abuse.

"I don't want food-stamp police to see what people do with their rice and beans, but it's wrong," Tanner told The Post. "The purpose of this program is to help Americans who don't have enough to eat. This is not intended as a form of foreign aid."

The United States spent \$522.7 million on foreign aid to the Caribbean last fiscal year, government data show.

Still, New Yorkers say they ship the food because staples available in the States are superior and less costly than what their families can get abroad.

"Everybody does it," said a worker at an Associated Supermarket in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn. "They pay for it any way they can. A lot of people pay with EBT."

Customers pay cash for the barrels, usually about \$40, and typically ship them filled with \$500 to \$2,000 worth of rice, beans, pasta, canned milk and sausages.

Workers at the Pioneer Supermarket on Parkside Avenue and the Key Food on Flatbush Avenue confirmed the practice.

They said food-stamp recipients typically take home their barrels and fill them gradually over time with food bought with EBT cards.

When the tubs are full, the welfare users call a shipping company to pick them up and send them to the Caribbean for about \$70. The shipments take about three weeks.

Last week, a woman stuffed dozens of boxes of macaroni and evaporated milk into a barrel headed for her family in Kingston, Jamaica. She said she didn't have welfare benefits and bought the food herself.

"This is all worth more than \$2,000," she said. "I've been shopping since last December. You can help somebody else, someone who doesn't live in this country."

A man helping her pack the barrel said: "We're poor here, and they're poor. But what we can get here is like luxury to them."