



The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Public aid: picking up groceries, shame

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July 27, 2014

The family celebration was to have been a simple one: soda, dessert and a few high-fives to congratulate the middle child for "graduating" pre-k and the oldest on his upcoming transition to middle school.

So Meg Johnston, a working wife who also has an infant son, headed to a grocery store near her Marietta house for provisions. Johnston gathered the soft drinks and ice cream. Then she pulled the WIC vouchers from her purse to make sure she could afford the other items in her cart: WIC doesn't cover soda and dessert, just the essentials, like milk, cereal and eggs. To pay for the party snacks, Johnston had a little cash.

But she wasn't the only one inspecting her WIC vouchers, Johnston said. Standing in the chill of the frozen foods aisle, another woman was watching, looking alternately at the vouchers and the snacks.

"You know, if you're on government assistance you really shouldn't be buying ice cream and soda," the woman said, according to Johnston. "I was stunned. I didn't know what to say. I held it together long enough to pay and get to my car, but I was bawling by the time I got in."

Debate over entitlement programs may begin with policy issues and budgets. But in supermarket aisles and checkout lines, the political quickly turns personal. People using food stamps to buy perceived luxuries may be called out by other shoppers --- an act of public shaming that has become an increasingly contentious part of the entitlements argument.

Such incidents are almost impossible to quantify; judgments rendered in smirks and murmurs, with the only witnesses being the parties involved and maybe a few bystanders. In letters to news outlets, posts on social media and conversations with caseworkers, cashiers and academics, aid recipients around the country describe the unsolicited and often derogatory comments they hear when they pay for their food with a government benefit.

And yet, even as there are official mechanisms in place to monitor and prosecute actual entitlement fraud, is it right for a fellow shopper to police how another feeds her family and shame her for how she does it?

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Libertarian Cato Institute and a staunch critic of entitlement programs, says no.

"You don't criticize soldiers because you don't like the war," Tanner said. "They should be criticizing the program, not the people."

But Tanner also believes that removing the stigma from public assistance has a downside: "I think there has been an internal shift in the recipient population, a normalization of it among people that says, 'I should get it, I deserve it.' We've moved away from communities helping each other, and now there's a feeling that the government will do it."

Federal assistance to needy families is delivered in a sea of acronyms: SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program formerly called food stamps; EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer), the plastic card that replaced paper food stamps; WIC, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, designed to help mothers and youngsters up to age 5.

For most people, the distinctions blur. What is clear is only that they are entitlements.

"I hear it a lot from clients, that they go to pay for their food and they pull out an EBT card or WIC, or maybe they have a soda, and then they hear snide remarks from customers behind them, or they notice a change in the cashier's attitude," said Extriara Gates, benefits screener for the Atlanta Community Food Bank. "I guess the assumption is that poor people should only eat certain things."

At a Kroger store in Warner Robins, as other customers watched, Cynthia Nerger was reduced to tears when store employees, including a store manager, got into a debate at the register over which items were covered by Nerger's food stamps. At the time, in late 2012, Nerger told a local television station that the manager ended the argument by saying to her, "Excuse me for working for a living and not relying on food stamps like you."

Kroger later apologized to her. In a recent email to the AJC, Kroger declined further comment on the episode, saying the "matter was isolated and was resolved mutually between the customer and Kroger."

Nerger, 30, said she still carries with her the humiliation of that day.

"People don't understand how hurtful words can be," Nerger said recently. "It's sad that people are just mean these days and don't think before they speak."

While it might not be another person's business how a customer pays to feed his or her family, there was no hiding it with the old, paper food stamps that resembled Monopoly money, or the current WIC vouchers, which look like oversized checks. Such clear indicators of need created a stain that often kept people from applying for aid, Gates said.

Over the past 15 years, changes aimed at reducing fraud and streamlining administration of the programs had the added effect of reducing stigma. Primary among the changes was the transition from paper food stamps to EBT cards, which look like debit cards.

But as the food stamp rolls soared to a record 47 million Americans during the last recession, the cost of safety net programs became a target. And, in some ways, people getting the aid became targets as well, with some prominent commentators in conservative media demanding to know why a person on aid would be allowed to buy certain foods.

"These targeting campaigns tend to happen during economic downturns and unfortunately it's how some people try to resolve their own economic anxiety," said Ange-Marie Hancock, author of "The Politics of Disgust and the Public Identity of the Welfare Queen," and associate professor of political science and gender studies at the University of Southern California.

"Historically there have always been these efforts to 'guide' the poor," said Michael Leo Owens, associate professor of political science at Emory University. "But there's nothing patriotic about this kind of talk or morally upstanding about it. It's about belittling people."

Whitney Graves, a manager in the grocery industry in metro Atlanta for more than 15 years, said she has seen episodes of shaming throughout her career. Usually the incidents happened from customer to customer.

"You see somebody with crab legs and every month they are buying them, and you make a good wage and you can't, of course there's resentment," Graves said. "You hear chatter from folks in line and it's like, 'How did you get that because I can't.'"

Because her store saw a high percentage of people on assistance, employees were given sensitivity training in how to deal respectfully with customers who used those forms of payment, she said. They were told that no matter what they might think about a person being on aid, "you kept it to yourself because these folks paid our way," Graves said.

Meg Johnston is clear about how she landed at poverty's edge. She makes \$10 an hour as a certified nursing assistant. She said she was fired from her last job as a scheduler at a home health care firm for losing her temper. That was more than a year ago, and since then, she said, she has been trying to rebuild her career and studying nursing through Kennesaw State University.

Her husband, Joshua, is an assistant manager at a fast food pizza restaurant and hopes to manage his own franchise. Both of their jobs are in Canton, a 26-mile each-way commute from their Marietta home.

When she got pregnant with her third child, the couple's income qualified her for Medicaid and WIC.

"I've had to grapple with feelings of guilt of being 32 years old and not having an established career that can provide for my family," Johnston said. "But I'm not a welfare queen. I don't stay on the government dole. I am trying to make a better life for my family. But sometimes you've got to swallow your pride and ask for help."

Johnston said she hasn't been back to the store where she was embarrassed since the encounter. When her kids asked her that day why she was crying, she explained to them in terms they could understand: She told them someone had bullied her in the store.

"I wasn't using government money to buy junk," Johnston said. "I just wanted something nice for the kids because we were proud of them. But she (the other shopper) just decided I was doing something wrong.