

Program cuts have pantries feeling pinch

By Jackie Runion
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MARIETTA - A possible \$9 billion cut in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance, commonly called food stamps, has food banks and pantries stocking up their shelves as people reflect on the program's place in the nation's economy.

In 2009, the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act temporarily raised the maximum amount that households could receive in benefits from S.N.A.P. That stimulus plan expired in November, which resulted in about a \$10 decrease per person, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Now into the new year, the possible federal cut would take place over a decade, and is a fraction of the cut that Republicans put on the table initially and about double what Democrats pitched.

S.N.A.P. is the second-largest social welfare program in the United States, and in Washington County, 8,300 are enrolled in food stamps benefits, as of 2013.

Tom Ballengee, the director of Washington County Job and Family Services, said it is not known yet how many in Washington County will lose S.N.A.P. benefits because of cuts Congress could make.

Washington County, like the majority of counties in Ohio, ended a waiver that loosened work requirements. Able-bodied adults without dependents now are required to hold a job or be enrolled in a work program to receive food stamps.

Fact Box

Program Numbers

National S.N.A.P. Participants

*?Fiscal year 2013: 47,636,000.

*?FY 2012: 46,609,000 .

*?FY 2011: 44,709,000.

*?FY 2010: 40,302,000 .

*?Benefit per person (average): \$134.05.

*?Benefit per household (average): \$275.72.

Source: USDA.gov

Ohio S.N.A.P. Participants

*?FY 2013: 1,824,675.

*?FY 2012: 1,807,913.

*?FY 2011: 1,779,237.

*?FY 2010: 1,607,422.

Washington County S.N.A.P. Participants

*?In 2011: 7,929.

*?In 2010: 7,771.

*?In 2009: 7,113.

*?In 2008: 6,113.

In average cases to qualify for S.N.A.P. benefits, a household of just one person must receive a monthly gross income of less than \$1,245. For each additional person, the maximum increases by \$436. Exceptions can be made for the elderly and people with disabilities.

Opinions on S.N.A.P. are mixed within Congress as well as outside of it.

Linda Allen, director of the Western Washington County Food Pantry in Vincent, said she is gearing up for increased traffic like other pantries and banks are nationwide.

"We've had people coming and saying 'I used to get such and such money and now I have nothing,' and now they come to the food pantry," she said.

Since the pantry was established in 1991, food was given out to households six times in the calendar year. As of mid-spring 2013, individuals and families can now receive assistance every single month.

According to FeedingAmerica.org, households live off food stamps for an average of nine months.

"I don't think that cutting people's food stamps is a good idea, because there are so many people who are not working, and if they are, it's minimum wage, without 40 hours a week," Allen said,

noting that increased prices and food stamps cuts have left many, especially the elderly or immobile, with nowhere to turn.

"We do a lot of work with the elderly because they can't get the food stamps like people with kids, so they cut out food for medicine," she said.

Marietta Councilman Roger Kalter, D-1st Ward, has a slightly different approach to helping those in need of food. Kalter works with Harvest of Hope to foster projects like community gardens, a fresh and free source of homegrown food that can help those in need.

"There are certainly people that need all the help they can get because of a lot of different issues - mental health, disability issues," Kalter said.

"It's a long-term issue, so we need to be thinking about things beyond handouts," he said.
"There's always going to be people picking up food in a brand new Cadillac."

Those at the Cato Institute, a public policy research think tank that stands by the idea of limited government, thinks that food stamps need to go.

A study on S.N.A.P.'s impact found that it has failed in more ways than one, citing it as an "inefficient, fraud-ridden, and deeply-troubled program."

Cato found evidence of weak work requirements that are underreported on paper and rapid expansion of dependence and fraud, where people are selling food stamps or hiding income.

"Continued expansion of the program seems to be based more on faith than evidence," said Michael Tanner, the study's author.

With about one in seven Americans using food stamps, the program "increases dependence and undermines work ethic," Tanner reports.

The study concludes that the goal of food stamps being a short-term solution has made it into one of long-term abuse.

Jeremy Tkach, a Waterford native, said he thinks food stamps are necessary, but should come with stipulations.

"Jobs are hard to find right now, so I don't really think work requirements should be any stricter," he said. "If you need food, you need food."

That need though, Tkach said, should still be scrutinized.

"I do think people should be drug-tested. If you have the money to do drugs, you have the money to buy yourself food," he said.

It's because of that kind of abuse of the system, and the difficulty in determining real need, that Kalter emphasizes how creating solutions to allow people to be more self-sufficient, rather than just handing things out, is more effective.

"The issue of giving everyone everything they need is that there's needs and there's wants," Kalter said. "Once your basic needs are met, you're still not going to be happy."