

Fuel for the War on Poverty

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This summer, those of us who fight hunger in our communities celebrate the 40th anniversary of the cornerstone of government nutrition assistance -- the Food Stamp Program.

In signing the law on Aug. 31, 1964, President Johnson said the program, “one of our most valuable weapons for the war on poverty,” combines “humanitarian instincts with the best of the free-enterprise system, improving the diets of low-income people” while “strengthening markets for the farmer and immeasurably improving the volume of retail food sales.”

Indeed, food stamps benefit both families and local businesses. They provide precious sustenance for people with low-incomes, and stimulate economic activity by bringing federal food stamp dollars directly into local communities. In New York State, over \$150 million in food stamps are issued *each month*, with households receiving an average monthly benefit of \$169. New Yorkers spend these benefits, which are 100% federally funded, to purchase groceries and fresh produce from local retail markets. This means that our neighbors are fed, local economies profit and communities are healthier.

However, the not-so-good news is that not all New Yorkers who are eligible for food stamp benefits receive them. Estimates show that in 2002, only 50% of potentially eligible people in our state receive food stamps (Mathematica Policy Institute, 2005). For older New Yorkers, estimates are that the participation rate is even lower, with only 31% (17% upstate and 45% in NYC) of potentially eligible people aged 60 years and older receiving the nutrition assistance that food stamps provide.

The Nutrition Consortium NYS’s 2003 report, *Don’t Lose Out* shows how NYC misses out on \$1 billion and each upstate county misses out on an average of \$7.8 million each year because not every eligible person receives food stamp benefits, including people who work for low wages or who are senior citizens, disabled,

have children, or cannot work. In lean economic times, these federal dollars are especially welcome, because they are quickly re-spent in local communities.

Why are people at risk of hunger not accessing the nutrition assistance food stamps offers? The complicated answer includes a lack of program awareness, the inconvenience of the application process and some localities not doing as much as they should do to enroll eligible people.

Thankfully, both our federal and state governments have taken a number of steps to increase program access. As part of the 2002 farm bill, Congress revised the Food Stamp Program to encourage participation by more of us who are employed but whose jobs do not pay a living wage. New York State has put into place a simplified food stamp application form, a transitional benefit program (which provides five months of continued food stamps for families leaving welfare), and an automatic food stamp enrollment project for many elderly and disabled recipients of Supplemental Security Income. New York also has a Nutrition Outreach and Education Program (NOEP) to help connect low-income people with the Food Stamp Program.

At a time when many of us lack health insurance and are struggling to pay high housing costs and increased gasoline prices, the Food Stamp Program continues to make a real difference in the lives and health of vulnerable people. Forty years after its founding, the Food Stamp Program helps over 1.5 million New Yorkers stretch their budgets and put food on the table each month.

To find out if you may be eligible for food stamps, contact your local department of social services. To see if there is a Nutrition Outreach and Education Program in your area, contact the Nutrition Consortium NYS at 518-436-8757 x17 or www.HungerNYS.org.

The Nutrition Consortium NYS is a statewide private non-profit organization whose mission is to fight hunger in New York through outreach, public education, policy analysis and research.

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