

# Little Becoming Less

## States Enact Changes in Efforts to Curb SNAP Benefits

by Carol Ward

Mary, a 40-year-old mother of three, has fallen into poverty over the past two years. The San Diego resident was once middle-class, with a husband who had a secure job and a good income. But divorce, job loss, and other factors, including her ex-husband's financial recklessness, have plunged Mary—who received food stamps briefly in the early 1990s—into a realm she never thought she would see again.

“I certainly didn't expect all this to come crashing down,” says Mary, who recently completed her college degree in social work and is actively searching for a job related to her field. “But right now I have no income and no support.”

Mary turned again to food stamps, initially trying the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) call line, operated by San Diego County's Health and Human Services Agency. But several efforts produced no results; her calls were disconnected or placed on hold “forever,” and she was never able to get help from anyone via telephone. Luckily, the computer-savvy Mary was able to apply online and began receiving her benefits within days.

Mary is one of the millions of people, largely victims of the Great Recession, who have joined the food-stamp rolls in the past few years. Enrollment in the program has risen to about 46 million, up by 20 million recipients from five years ago. Annual spending for SNAP is at nearly \$80 billion.

As the need for food stamps has expanded, so have bureaucratic barriers to obtaining them—and so, too, have efforts at both the state and federal levels to curb SNAP benefit outlays. From a new assessment of assets for recipients in Pennsylvania, to a recalculation of benefits for some families in Kansas, to proposed drug testing of recipients in Florida and several other states, many legislators are intent on trimming costs and, in some cases, making sure recipients are truly “worthy” of the benefit.

An even bigger threat is developing at the federal level. In summer 2012, several legislators, led by representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, were calling for significant cuts to the program, citing the need to lower the federal deficit. At press time, the cuts were being debated in Congress.

### A Program That Works . . . to an Extent

Against that backdrop, poverty continues to threaten the well-being of families, including an estimated 16.4 million children, across the country. The SNAP program is designed to provide a supplemental food source to those most in need; an April 2012 report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows that the program has a significant and positive effect on those struggling to put food on the table.

According to the report, *Alleviating Poverty in the United States—The Critical Role of SNAP Benefits*, SNAP has a stronger effect on the depth and severity of poverty than on its prevalence; that is, while SNAP has had limited success at reducing the number of poor people, it has been able to lower the level of those people's poverty. The program is particularly effective, the report found, at minimizing poverty among children.

“When SNAP benefits are included in family income, the average annual decline from 2000 to 2009 in the depth [or average



level] of child poverty was 15.5 percent and the average annual decline in the severity [or worst cases] of child poverty was 21.3 percent,” the study revealed.

Still, current benefits often fall short of what families need, many advocates say, especially when nutrition guidelines are taken into account. In fact, a 2011 report, *The Real Cost of a Healthy Diet*, prepared jointly by the Center for Hunger-Free Communities, Children’s HealthWatch, and Drexel University’s School of Public Health, examined whether a healthy diet could be maintained by low-income families in Philadelphia who received the maximum SNAP benefit and shopped at neighborhood food stores.

The USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan, the national standard for a “nutritious diet at a minimal cost,” was cited in the study—which found that the plan is unaffordable for SNAP beneficiaries.

“A family of four who receives the maximum SNAP benefit would need to spend an additional \$2,352 per year on average to purchase the Thrifty Food Plan market basket items,” the study concluded.

## Limiting Access

An equally challenging aspect of the SNAP program is inaccessibility, whether because of tightened eligibility guidelines, overwhelmed staff, or a bewildering application process.

One of the biggest upheavals within the program at the state level is the reintroduction of asset testing in Pennsylvania.

The asset test, instituted on May 1 of this year, denies food stamps to anyone under the age of 60 with assets worth more than \$5,500. The threshold climbs to \$9,000 for households with members who are aged 60 and older or disabled. The rules pertain to cash, stocks, and bonds but exclude pension plans, retirement accounts, home values, or life insurance. The Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) projects that the new rules will affect about 2 percent of the roughly 1.8 million people receiving food stamps in the state.

Service providers in Pennsylvania, though, predict that the consequences will likely be more dire than that.

*Left: Families participate in a local festival that provides information and resources like fresh, free produce to help families put enough food on the table.*

*Right: A mother holds her three-week-old daughter at a local Department of Human Services office in Oklahoma. The single mom with two children has received food assistance intermittently since her first child was born, two years ago. A high school graduate, she works part-time building websites for a manufacturing company and aspires to become a nurse, but in the meantime she needs food stamps to get by.*

Laura Tobin Goddard, executive director of the Pennsylvania Hunger Action Center, says the new rules will turn some eligible applicants away.

“Many people really don’t like to provide their banking information and may view it as an invasion of privacy,” Tobin Goddard says. “We feel it’s going to turn people away from the program and to food banks and food pantries more than ever, and food pantries are already at their limits.”

Adam MacGregor, communications coordinator for Pittsburgh’s Just Harvest—which helps low-income people access government services—says that the new rules require extra, painstaking work from the clients, the county’s case workers, and go-between organizations like his own.

“It’s actually very difficult and time-consuming to apply for a lot of these programs,” MacGregor says. “If you don’t have the documentation that is required, and if you don’t have your affairs in order, then it’s difficult to get them in order quickly to apply for food stamps you need now.”



MacGregor notes that nearly 40 percent of cases are rejected due to improper documentation. He blames inadequate case-worker staffing and onerous requirements.

“Poverty is such a complex thing, and even missing a phone call or not having a reliable place to pick up your mail can spell disaster for people who are seeking help under the food-stamp program,” MacGregor says.

Joy, a mother of three in Pennsylvania, experienced first-hand the difficulties in navigating the DPW bureaucracy when she applied for food stamps a few years ago. She recalls filing three separate applications, making several phone calls, and waiting more than two months for her benefits to start. “I was really disappointed with the system,” she says. After encountering still more problems, Joy approached Just Harvest to help secure longer-term SNAP benefits.

According to MacGregor, early indications are that there is not a huge number of people being kicked out of the program because of their assets. (Of course, the asset test just went into effect on May 1, and client data are reviewed at six-month intervals.) “The real issue is the deterrent effect of the new asset rules,” he says.

Becky Abrams, director of the Squirrel Hill Community Food Pantry and SOS Pittsburgh, expects negative consequences for her program, which is run by the Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Pittsburgh.

“We’re briefed and ready for the asset-test impact,” Abrams says. “We think it will mainly impact our kosher family clients. It’s very expensive to keep your house strictly kosher. If these families are deemed ineligible for SNAP they might come to rely on our program solely to meet their kosher-food needs beyond what they can provide.

“I think I’m going to be purchasing more food, because I’m determined not to turn people away,” Abrams adds.

Kansas is also among the states that have adopted more stringent requirements for qualification for SNAP benefits. Earlier this year the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services changed the way it calculates SNAP eligibility. The new rules apply to mixed-status families, in which one or more members are undocumented.

Under the previous method, only a portion of the household income was counted for those families. For example, if a family of five earned \$2,000 a month, and the three children were U.S. citizens but the parents were not, the income would be divided among the five family members. As a result the children would be treated as a family of three earning \$1,200 a month. The new

rules simply do not count the noncitizen family members, thus determining that the three children earn \$2,000 a month—and are no longer eligible for benefits.

Shannon Cotsoradis, president and CEO of Kansas Action for Children, estimates that 2,000 Kansas children who are U.S. citizens have lost access to food stamps because of the change, and that many others have seen benefits reduced. “It’s much more difficult for us to capture how many families are impacted by a reduction in benefits, but the number is significant,” she says.

Cotsoradis describes the “climate of anti-social services” in Kansas, adding, “There have been a lot of policy changes that don’t need legislative approval and the results have been to reduce the level of benefits for families.”

Such reductions have had a significant effect on Latino families, according to Melinda Lewis, public-policy consultant for El Centro, a Kansas City, Kansas–based outreach organization that focuses on the Latino community.

“We have cases where women have gone back to their abusers because they can’t afford to feed their kids due to the loss of those benefits,” Lewis laments. “We have individuals who are making very tough decisions about the nutritional quality of the food they buy their kids. They’re making decisions about whether to pay their utility bill or buy food, they’re doubling up in households.”



Lewis blames the “hostile climate” generated by the state for newfound fears among immigrant communities that identification and deportation of undocumented people will expand.

“It has really undone years if not decades of work that immigrant-serving organizations like ours have done to build trust with parents and help them understand that their citizen children are eligible for the same benefits that other citizen children can receive,” Lewis points out. “We fear that the ramifications of the severing of the trust between the state and these families will last for years to come.”

Other states have enacted or are considering a variety of measures designed to curb use of food stamps. This year, 28 states have considered requiring drug tests for all recipients of public benefits. Florida passed that measure in 2011, though a lawsuit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union has made the law’s implementation uncertain. It seems likely that threats to food-stamp benefits will continue, and perhaps expand, as states grapple more and more with budget deficits.

## Calls Unanswered

While some states have taken no formal action to restrict SNAP benefits, even existing programs are sometimes dysfunctional.

Mary, the mom in San Diego, did not have an unusual experience when her calls to the food-stamp hotline went unanswered, according to Joni Halpern, director of the Supportive Parents Information Network, a group that helps families through the application process.

“In situations where organizations help the family by shepherding the application through, things are getting better,” Halpern says. “But if a person just goes to the office or makes a call, I wish them a lot of luck. It’s not going to be easy.”

Halpern says the county’s Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), which administers SNAP benefits, has seen a significant scaling back in staffing in recent years, to the point where “they’re not even in the neighborhood of keeping up.” She also criticizes the agency’s application-processing methods, which allow any caseworker to access any application, rather than having individual workers assigned to individual cases, making for confusion and ineffectiveness.

“We’re seeing more and more people who can’t get through the process because their documents were transferred and no one knows where they are,” she says. “The workers are unable to keep up. It becomes completely happenstance if a mistake gets corrected.”

That is, of course, if the applicant ever gets that far into the process. An internal HHSA report prepared by InTelegy, a call-center consulting firm, reportedly revealed that 350,000 calls to the food-stamp line—about five-sixths of total call volume—went unanswered. For those callers who got through, the average wait was approximately 30 minutes. The study blamed lack of workers and an inadequate number of phone lines.

In Florida, Sari Vatske, director of partner services for Feeding South Florida, reveals that her agency’s clients have encountered similar obstacles.

“We’re seeing an increase in the number of applicants and an increase in barriers to access,” Vatske says. “A lot of it has to do with budget cuts at DCF [Florida’s Department of Children and Families]. Their call centers are receiving 5,000 calls by 2 p.m. The people who can’t apply by computer are feeling very frustrated.”

In partnership with one or more other agencies, Feeding South Florida is in the planning stages of operating a call-processing center to help deal with the overflow and get more people enrolled.

“In Florida there is a lot of money that’s not being drawn against, but it’s because people can’t call in because the lines are busy and they just eventually give up,” Vatske explains.

In late 2010 Lowcountry Food Bank in Charleston, South Carolina, launched a “Benefit Bank” SNAP-outreach program in response to low usage of food stamps, according to president and CEO Pat Walker. Benefit Bank is an online software tool that conducts pre-screening for potential clients and helps them organize all needed paperwork.

Walker says the move was in response to findings from a study, conducted by his organization in partnership with Feeding America and Mathematica Policy Research, showing that only 34 percent of the Lowcountry Food Bank’s clients were SNAP recipients.

“For those who have never applied for SNAP, the study showed that a significant portion either thought they were ineligible, although they had incomes below the 130 percent of poverty threshold, or they were turned off by the inconvenient process,” Walker says, noting that problems have been compounded in recent years due to layoffs at the state level.

These stories suggest that while the SNAP program is helping, there are still many obstacles to full usage.

“All the obstacles take a toll on people’s dignity, they take a toll on their peace of mind, and poor people have very little peace of mind to begin with,” says MacGregor of Just Harvest. “The people enacting these laws need to have some empathy. Demand for help is up for a reason—people need help.” ■

*Left: A woman pieces together the weekly groceries for her family from free items at the local food bank, SNAP benefits, and wages.*