



COMMENTARY

Food stamp cuts are here, but we can take action

By **MICHAEL REDMOND**
To the Valley News

The *Valley News* recently reported on the impact of ending a COVID-era increase in benefits for individuals and families in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), sometimes called food stamps (“Food Pantries Brace for End of Benefits” by NPR’s Paul Cuno-Booth, March 3, 2023). As this article noted, the federal government had approved a temporary increase in these benefits early in the pandemic, but legislation passed this past December returned the amount of this benefit to these pre-pandemic levels starting this March.

COVID relief made a real impact on hunger and food insecurity across the nation and in Vermont and New Hampshire. The USDA reported last September of significant improvements in food insecurity for everyone in part due to SNAP benefit increases. For households with kids, it was measured at a two-decade low.

The loss of the SNAP “Emergency Allotment” program that just took effect will make a big difference. It’s not hard to see why this is the case when you look at the numbers. In Vermont, over 41,000 people will be affected by these benefit cuts; in New Hampshire, over 35,000. Each state will lose about \$7 million in total federal benefits per month that won’t be added to the local economy.

The impact on individuals will be severe and is relatively sudden, making this transition very challenging. For some people, including seniors, the loss of this “emergency allotment” will be devastating. Someone earning \$25,000 annually who was receiving \$281 of SNAP benefits each month under the COVID program will now get just \$23 to supplement food purchases. Karen Hebert, director of Economic Stability at the New Hampshire Department of

Health and Human Services has stated that 65% of SNAP households will see an average monthly decrease of \$108, the rest will lose an average of \$154.

Everyone in the Vermont and New Hampshire programs will see their benefits decrease, but the impact will be greatest for those on fixed incomes. At a time of continued rapid inflation in many food items, these cuts will only make life harder.

So that’s the bad news. What can be done? There are actions that can be taken at both the state and federal levels to minimize the impact. For example, in Massachusetts, Gov. Maura Healy has proposed a supplemental budget to fund the supplemental SNAP benefits at 40% to cushion the loss of the EA benefits. In Vermont, the House is taking up a bill that will continue a program of “universal school meals” that was funded during the pandemic by requiring all public schools to provide breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge. Continuing this program will cost the state about \$27 million annually.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack spoke just this past week saying that the Biden administration will take steps to strengthen the SNAP program and leverage other programs to decrease food insecurity. He also mentioned support for the universal school meals plan and summer food programs for children with a goal of making that program permanent in 2024 and continuing to make adjustments to the Thrifty Food Plan (the basis for SNAP payments) to better meet modern diets and the cost of living.

With a divided Congress, one source of potential agreement through compromise is the renewal this year of the Farm Bill which is reauthorized every five years. How it addresses food insecurity through SNAP and other food benefit programs will make a big difference. The largest impact will be in the amount of funding recom-

mended and for which specific programs. While charity food programs such as those operated by the Upper Valley Haven are important, the amount of aid provided is dwarfed by the federal budget’s support through income supplements.

Other areas of focus for the Farm Bill which can help households include rules which address how income is counted. Eliminating the cap on shelter expenses and allowing more people to claim the medical expense deduction can increase the amount of SNAP benefits a household receives. Other provisions that are a focus of advocates include addressing the arbitrary time limits for receiving SNAP benefits, access for college students and immigrants, and eliminating the prohibition on the purchase of hot prepared foods. Another proposal will remove the time limits on SNAP benefits to support participants as they look for and find work. However, there is a lot of worry that some factions in Congress seeking to cut government spending will focus on programs that aid people with the lowest incomes such as SNAP.

New Hampshire Hunger Solutions and the New Hampshire Legal Assistance are working to make sure people are aware of the exemptions to their income that, if applied for, would increase the amount of SNAP benefits they receive each month. In New Hampshire, there hasn’t been any funding for this marketing since 2017 though funding was finally requested from USDA in this year’s budget. Important exemptions to income include out-of-pocket child care or adult-care expenses, utilities expenses, child care support payments and some out-of-pocket medical expenses.

At the Upper Valley Haven, we will do our part to make sure these exemptions are better known for food shelf visitors. We also will continue to provide information on other targeted

programs that reduce the cost of food or provide additional benefits like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants & Children (WIC) and the Commodities Supplemental Nutrition Program for low income seniors. We’ll look to increase our community food programs that support many local food pantries. Our partnership with Dartmouth Health has added emergency food bags in five primary care clinics at DHMC and Alice Peck Day Hospital. Remote food pantries at the “Moms in Recovery” program and the Dartmouth Cancer Center help patients who otherwise are challenged for transportation and health reasons to have access to nutritious produce, packaged and prepared foods.

With donated foods to the Vermont Foodbank reduced significantly since pre-pandemic levels (40% from federal sources), the Haven will need to rely more on our own food purchasing power and donations from local partners. Fortunately, the UV community has generously supported the Haven through our major fundraising campaigns during Hunger Action Month and 19 Days of the Haven. We are ready to increase our food budget for purchases as needed.

What can everyone do? If you are concerned about the impact of these cuts in programs that support food security, please contact your state legislators, governors and congressional representatives to urge them to support initiatives to restore this funding for SNAP and approve new initiatives like universal school meals. You can also support local food pantries and the state food banks through food and cash donations. And think about volunteering. You’ll feel better and will be helping your neighbors too.

Michael Redmond is the executive director of the Upper Valley Haven.