

Anxiety as Stimulus Hike in Food Stamps Set to End

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By RIK STEVENS Associated Press

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A temporary increase in food stamps expires Oct. 31, meaning for millions of Americans, the benefits that help put food on the table won't stretch as far as they have for the past four years.

Food stamps — actually the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — go to 47 million Americans a month, almost half of them children and teenagers.

"Every week is a struggle as it is," said Heidi Leno, 43, who lives in Concord with her husband, 9-year-old daughter and twin 5-year-olds. "We hate living paycheck to paycheck and you have to decide what gets paid."

Starting in 2009, the federal stimulus pumped \$45.2 billion into SNAP, increasing what would have been a monthly benefit of \$588 a month to \$668 for an average household of four. In November, that same family will start getting \$632 a month, about a 5 percent cut.

The monthly benefits, which go to 1 in 7 Americans, fluctuate based on factors including food prices, income and inflation.

Families and providers worry the expiration of the stimulus bump comes at a particularly bad time:

— Though census figures from September show poverty remains stuck at around 22 percent, in some states, including New Hampshire, the number of children living in poverty is climbing.

— The House voted to cut almost \$4 billion a year from the roughly \$80 billion-a-year program in an effort to find savings in the budget. A Senate bill would cut around \$400 million a year.

— In cold weather states, even a slight decrease in the benefit can trigger a decision between heating and eating. Heating fuel prices are expected to increase this year, too, the government warned this week.

And the program could face another shortfall if the government is shuttered past Nov. 1.

Danielle Walker, 37, was shopping at a discount Aldi store in Morgantown, W.Va., with what little cash she had, the end of September still three days away. Her food stamps had run out because of a previous cut from \$500 to \$61 a month that came about when the father of her 12-year-old son died, giving the boy survivor benefits that changed the family's income level.

With two disabled sons, 12 and 16, each with different dietary requirements, she can barely imagine how she'll absorb another cut. So, she'll visit food pantries, clip coupons and shop at the least expensive stores she can find. She also explains her situation to manufacturers, who send coupons.

"I'm a mom who does outside-of-the-box things," she said, adding, "I have to feed my boys."

But the stimulus was never intended to be a permanent source of money, former U.S. Sen. Judd Gregg of New Hampshire said. He opposed the stimulus, calling it at the time "a great deal of money not well spent."

"All stimulus funding was to be temporary," Gregg, now the CEO of a banking industry group, said Wednesday.

John Cochrane, a professor of finance at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, also opposed the stimulus, saying it advanced the false assumption that "completely wasted federal spending helps the economy."

He said worries about people who need help were a legitimate concern but that food stamps create a disincentive to move to find a better job because recipients are worried they'll lose the benefit.

"At some point," he said, "you have to be a little bit heartless."

One recipient, Jennifer Donald, a 31-year-old mother of three in Philadelphia, said she counts on the family's \$460 monthly benefit to put food on the table. Her husband has a job sanitizing machines at meat-packing plants but it doesn't pay enough. She'll have to reduce the quality of the food she buys to stretch the benefits, then turn to food pantries once the money runs out.

"I was mad and devastated and a little bit confused because we need our benefits," Donald said in an interview at her row house, where she was preparing ground-beef tacos, a family favorite, while her 10-year-old daughter and two sons, 6 and 4, played and did homework. "This is the way we eat right now. Live a day in our life before you can cut our benefits."

In Concord, the New Hampshire Food Bank has seen demand grow steadily, even as donations have fallen. The bank distributed 8.5 million pounds of food last year, compared with 4.5 million pounds at the start of the recession in 2007. Executive Director Mel Gosselin said the added pressure from expiration of the supplement will hurt.

"That's going to mean more reliance on emergency food systems that are already stretched to the max," she said during a tour of the bank's 60,000-square-foot warehouse. Three racks stretched to the ceiling but many shelves were bare as workers scooted around on pallet lifts loaded with food.

In Lansing, Mich., 55-year-old Cindy Aldrich is a diabetic with a number of health problems and special diet. Any cut in her \$200-a-month food allowance "just scares me," Aldrich said.

"When they cut my food stamps, they cut my pride in being a human being," she said. "I go without a lot. Now I'll go without more."

"Food stamps do not support a diabetic diet; doesn't even come close," she said. "I'm supposed to eat a lot of vegetables, some fruit, some carbs. Six ounces of meat per day isn't a lot. I don't have a big freezer. There are times I'm eating the same thing for a week."