

US Congress prepares to cut food stamps for millions

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3 August 2013

Cuts being considered in Congress to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), more commonly known as food stamps, would eliminate 5.1 million people from the program, including 1.4 million children and 876,000 seniors. The US poverty rate is expected to rise by at least half a percentage point if the reductions in funding are passed.

Currently one in six Americans, including 17 million children, cannot afford adequate food. Since the onset of the world economic crisis, the use of food stamps in the US has soared, rising from 9 percent of the population in 2008 to nearly 15 percent in 2012. SNAP currently helps feed nearly 48 million people.

To compensate for the growth in demand for food stamps, federal funding increased from \$35 billion in fiscal year 2007 to \$80 billion in 2012. Democratic and Republican politicians regard providing this level of federal aid to the most destitute layers of society unacceptable.

Eighty-three percent of those who would be cut from SNAP benefits under the proposed legislation have a net income below the poverty line (which is \$23,050 for a family of four), even after their SNAP benefits are taken into account. Those who lose access to their food stamps will, on average, see their overall income decline by a third.

As a result of the cuts, up to 305,000 more people will have difficulty obtaining enough to eat, becoming “food insecure.” These individuals will then be at greater risk for a range of diseases connected to food insecurity, such as diabetes, heart disease, depression, asthma, cognitive impairment and behavioral problems in children. The medical costs for diabetes alone are expected to increase by \$15 billion over 10 years if the SNAP cuts are implemented.

Changes to the eligibility standards for SNAP will

also make it more difficult for up to 1.2 million children that live in these households to receive school meal programs.

These latest figures comes from a study by the Health Impact Project, which analyzes the likely effects of the legislation recently introduced in the US Senate and House. Although the House version of the bill was defeated in June, legislators are working on developing a new, bipartisan bill. Cuts of \$20.5 billion to food stamps are expected to be the starting point for this legislation. As such, the Health Impact Project used that figure as the basis for its report.

In addition to the SNAP cuts, the legislation under discussion would reduce the other monthly benefits that come with the program, particularly the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

Families, particularly those with children or a disabled or elderly family member, will be forced to choose between buying food, paying utilities, and receiving medical care. Already, an estimated 32 percent of households on LIHEAP with a senior report going without medical or dental care as a result of high utility bills. This will only worsen with reductions in access to energy assistance.

The legislation currently being proposed in Congress comes on top of the already scheduled cuts to SNAP starting November 1, when \$3.3 billion will be axed from the budget, affecting 23 million low-income households, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. A family of three will lose between \$20 to \$25 a month, which translates into 11 meals.

These cuts are occurring at the same time that additional funding for food stamps, financed as part of the 2009 federal stimulus package, comes to an end. Not only has the government allowed these funds to expire, the Obama administration and Congress have

pushed up the end date for the financing, which was originally slated for 2014.

In addition, all of these changes come on the heels of reductions to federal food and nutrition programs that occurred in March of this year as part of sequestration. Programs like Meals on Wheels, which brings disabled seniors daily meals, have estimated that they will be able to provide 19 million fewer meals a year. Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), a program that provides pregnant women, new mothers and their children essential nutrients for proper childhood development, lost \$496 million of its funding largely due to sequestration.

Both the current legislation and the cuts in November will further stress other food programs. Feeding America, a charity-based organization that helps feed 37 million people in the US, estimates that each of its food banks would have to provide 4 million meals each year to make up for the losses caused by SNAP. This is simply beyond the organization's capacity.



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