Food stamp cuts in US overwhelm anti-hunger agencies

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12 November 2013

As of November 1, the US government began implementing massive cuts—at least $11 billion over three years to the nationwide Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), popularly known as food stamps.

SNAP, which provides federal funding for nutrition assistance to low-income families, has seen a 70 percent surge in participants needing food aid since 2007. The reduction in assistance comes under conditions of mass unemployment and levels of social misery not seen since the Great Depression, with record numbers of Americans living in poverty.

Even before the cuts were implemented, the food assistance provided through SNAP was not sufficient to fully meet the needs of low-income households, which rely on extra assistance from emergency food pantries and soup kitchens during the final week of every month. Now, taking the cuts into account, the average SNAP enrollee will receive less than $1.40 per meal during 2014.

Tens of millions of US families depend on emergency food pantries to survive. The pantries are charities, which are able to provide last-resort assistance on the basis of voluntary contributions.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Janet Warren, manager at Open Hands Food Pantry in Royal Oak, Michigan—a suburb of Detroit—about the food crisis facing working class families.

"Every food pantry around is swamped. We are seeing lots of new people. Since the crash in 2008, there has been no recovery. This is the worst I have seen it and it's getting worse. There is no letup in sight. At the same time, food pantries are closing.

"Most of the people who come in here are the working poor. They have employment but cannot afford food anyway. We are seeing many more families with children than before. Children are going hungry. We used to give out food two days a month. Now we do three weeks, because the need has gone up so much.

"We're seeing veterans come in, senior citizens, and many more homeless than before. Congressmen spend more on a lunch than people out here spend in a month on food."

According to statistics presented in the *Washington Post* ("Feeding families made more hungry by Congress"), the November 1 SNAP cuts slashed the equivalent value of the current food supplies at all of the soup kitchens and food pantries in the US combined. The *Post* reported that the five percent cut to SNAP payments will require food charities to double their stocks to fill the gap.

In the wake of the cuts, the Food Bank for New York has reported that a total of 76 million meals, or one week's worth of food per month, will be withdrawn from aid to recipients. A survey conducted by the Food Bank found that the number of New York food stamp recipients who experienced hunger jumped from 23 to 30 percent between 2012 and 2013.

Statistics on hunger provided by No Kid Hungry.org show pervasive malnutrition and food insecurity in the US, with at least 25 percent of households in American cities found to be food insecure.

The SNAP cuts impact heavily on the most vulnerable groups in society. At least 47 percent of participants in the program are younger than 18 years old.

The WSWS spoke with Michael Burwell, Executive Director at Kids Against Hunger, which delivers dehydrated food packets designed to feed six adults or twelve children per packet. The packets contain a soy component, a vegetable blend, a vitamin seasoning, and

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rice, and are prepared by adding water.

The food packages, designed for disaster relief and refugee crisis situations in Third World countries, are now becoming standard fare for families facing hunger in the US.

“Demand for the food packets has gone up since 2008. Before the crash, people wouldn’t bother with our food. After 2008, they’re looking at the food like this is good stuff. Many kids are eating these meals five times a week.

“If people could find jobs, they would buy food themselves. We live in a society where many people are down economically, and cannot make ends meet any longer.

“Detroit sees very high levels of undernourishment and malnourishment. People aren't getting the nutrients they need, largely because they aren’t even getting three square meals a day. At least one in five children in Michigan is going hungry."

A 2013 Deloitte study titled, “Ending Childhood Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis,” showed that rampant food insecurity among US children leads to impaired brain development, lower academic achievement and more frequent hospitalizations.” The study shows that 48.8 million Americans, including 16.2 million children, will face undernourishment and malnourishment this year, and that 62 percent of teachers report regularly seeing students coming to school hungry, according to the report.

The WSWS spoke with Kevin outside of a supermarket in Royal Oak, Michigan about the impact of the cuts. “It’s not good. There are going to be more cuts. When people can’t eat, it’s going to be bad. People will do desperate things to eat. They will do whatever it takes. It’s going to be a rough year.

“People are constantly saying, ‘What are we supposed to do?’ These are hardworking people who never thought they would need food stamps. They say that we’re crying broke, but we have casinos, we have billionaires, and we have new stadiums going up.

There’s lots of money, really. We have to find out where that money is going. We know it’s coming in, but where is it going? It’s definitely not going to the folks who really need it.”

“Latina Miller, a teacher in Warren, Michigan said, “I think the cuts are utterly heartless. We are in a jobless economy. Opportunities are few and becoming fewer.

“We have two programs to feed kids, we’re feeding at least 300 kids at the school, and this year we have twice as many families trying to get food assistance as last year.

“I don’t believe the recession is over. I see hungry kids every day. Kids are begging their friends for food, and sneaking snacks home to eat the next day."

Ruth, an Oak Park resident, told the WSWS, “My grandson and my son both depend on food stamps. It’s horrible. My son is disabled and gets $700 per month to live on. He has three children to support and they just cut his food stamps. My grandson was laid off, and now his unemployment money is about to run out.

“They are hitting the poor people hard. I don’t understand. They are hitting the weak and the poor.”

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