Cuts to federal food assistance hit Illinois workers

Our reporters
13 November 2013

With the ending of more than $45 billion in food aid to low-income families on November 1, about 47 million people in the United States have had their food budgets reduced. Despite the growing need for access to nutritious food, the Obama administration has allowed the 2009 emergency funding to the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) to expire.

Two million people in Illinois—16 percent of the state's population, including more than 300,000 seniors and about 900,000 children—have had their benefits cut. Assistance has dropped from between $19 and $34 per month, depending on household size and income. The supplemental benefit is now at $1.40 per meal.

Illinois Department of Human Services spokeswoman Januari Smith told the *Chicago Tribune*, "It seems like a small decrease, but it will have an impact on those who depend on it. People will have to make tough decisions, including choosing between necessary medicines and putting food on the table."

Since the onset of the recession, the number of people on food aid in the Chicago area alone has skyrocketed, increasing 46 percent in Cook County, 133 percent in DuPage County, 84 percent in Lake County, 96 percent in Kane County, 168 percent in McHenry County, and 74 percent in Will County.

Greater Chicago Food Depository spokesman Paul Morello said, "The face of hunger is changing. We're seeing people who have jobs, who maybe own their home, who maybe own a car, but who simply have lost their job, who've seen their hours cut back. I've talked to a number of people who have said, 'You know, I have two jobs.' I've talked to some people who say they have three jobs, and they still can't make ends meet."

In spite of the temporary increase in federal food benefits since 2009, demand at Cook County food pantries has been up 70 percent over the past five years. With the recent SNAP cuts, pantry and food bank workers fear it will be impossible to keep up with the need.

The cuts are anticipated to have broad economic effects. Dan Lesser of the Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, told Chicago Public Radio, "There is a real risk that we may lose food retailers, particularly in areas of the state where there is a high usage of SNAP. So we are talking about making the food desert problem worse."

Food deserts refer to large areas of low incomes where access to fresh, nutritious food is limited. Large areas of the south and west sides of Chicago have no full-sized grocery retailers. Rural areas of Illinois are similarly affected, where incomes are low and distances between retail centers are greater. (USDA map of low income, low-access areas for food: http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas)

WSWS reporters spoke with workers and youth in Chicago and in central Illinois about the cuts.

Dave, a temporary laborer living in Chicago, said, "It's totally wrong they're taking money out of the very places—I mean, this is *food* we're talking about. The philosophy of taking money out of peoples' mouths is very bad. It affects corporations too in a roundabout way because people won't be spending at Jewel and Dominick's."

"I don't have any dependents, so twenty to thirty dollars less a month doesn't really affect me. It gets dicey though. Today I went to a friend's house and ate. Normally I wouldn't have—but, like I said, I don't have kids so it doesn't affect me."

Flo, a worker at the Kraft Foods factory in Champaign, said about the cuts, "There's a lot of

© World Socialist Web Site

people upset about it. I've got a couple friends whose cards were cut who are ticked off.

She noted that even before the most recent cuts, her friends have struggled to make ends meet. "It was living like Link to Link [food assistance is distributed on Link cards]. They shouldn't be cutting it at all. They almost had a catastrophe on their hands when the Link site went down a few weeks ago. People are pissed."

One retired worker, when asked if he thought foods stamps should be cut, responded, "No. They keep messing with the middle class and poor people. What we need are jobs."

Cliff, who works at a Party City retail store, said, "My friend's mom was taken off food stamps. It's completely unfair, she's got two kids."

When asked if he ever had difficulty affording food, he responded, "I think that's something a lot of people have been through."

"I feel they should be increasing it. There are so many that need the help. If they're cutting food stamps, it's hurting people's chances of surviving. How do you know if you're going to be able to feed your kids? I feel like it's making people crazy, like there's going to be a riot or something."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site