

Food stamp cuts hurting poor and low-income workers in Syracuse, New York

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Soup kitchens and food pantries in upstate New York are being inundated with new people in need of food to feed themselves and their families as hunger grows among the record levels of people living in poverty.

The November 1 cut in Food Stamp benefits by the Congress and the Obama administration is only adding to this problem, as families who are struggling to heat their homes are being forced to spend even more on food.

Half the children in the cities of Utica, Syracuse, and Rochester are growing up in families living at or below the ridiculously low federal poverty level, currently set at \$23,550 a year for a family of four. In Buffalo, over 46 percent of all children are living in poverty. Nearly one in five children in these cities are growing up in families who earn less than half the poverty level. Hunger is at epidemic levels.

The cuts in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, commonly known as Food Stamps, are driving up these numbers.

The WSWS spoke to workers from the Syracuse area about how the food stamp cuts are affecting them.

“Our food stamps just took an \$80-a-month cut,” said Stephen Parrott, the father of four.

The Food Stamp program was never designed to provide food for an entire month. Based on the USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan, the benefits typically run out in the second or third week of the month, leaving people to find other means for food. The cuts made to food stamps on November 1 are causing the benefits to run out even sooner.

“That is a lot of food out of our mouths, “ said Parrott. “This is not right. People have to be able to eat. They can give the banks all this money, but they cut the money for those who are poor and work for a living. The politicians don’t care about the working people.

There are no jobs, but what do they expect people to do.”

Stephen Parrott, like many in the upstate New York area, is unemployed. “I worked seven years for the county doing facilities management, taking care of roads, that kind of thing. I was laid off about three years ago when the government was cutting all those jobs. They did a general rollback. I didn’t think it was going to hit me with seven years in, but a lot of people lost their jobs.”

Many families in Syracuse are in a similar situation. The official unemployment rate is 15 percent, almost twice the national average, and many more people have given up looking for work or are working in the underground economy, trying to get by doing odd jobs.

“We expect to see a big increase in demand as a result of the cuts in food stamps,” said Brian McManus of the Food Bank of Central New York, which collects and provides food to emergency food programs such as food pantries, emergency shelters and soup kitchens in the 11-county region of central New York, which includes Syracuse and Utica.

The food bank delivers 1 million pounds of food each month. “There are a limited number of jobs where people earn enough to support a family. Syracuse and much of the region have been experiencing a decline for a long time. This leaves a lot of people out.

“Food stamps are the last of the safety net programs, and they have cut a big hole in it. These cuts are a big deal. It is the last safety line to people, and when you cut that, a lot of people will go without.”

William Pettis, 49, is a disabled vet who served in the Marines for six years. “I don’t like to say anything against the government since I served for them for six years, but I am definitely against the cutbacks in food stamps. This is especially going to hurt the children,

they have to have something to eat.

“There are no jobs, people need jobs so that they can earn a living and feel that they are part of a society. There is a lot of work that needs done, people could be working to help out the city. The city is full of pools, but they need recreation centers and places where young people can go.

“If people had good jobs, there wouldn’t be so much crime. The young people have nothing to do and they are starting to just hang out on the corners and get into trouble.

“The food stamp cuts are hurting people.” Referring to the Food Bank, he added, “Food stamps don’t pay enough as it is, so you have people coming to get food wherever they can. But there is not enough food. The food stamps cuts are especially going to hurt the children and our senior citizens, and that is wrong.”

The Hunger Action Network, in a 2012 study, “Hungry in New York,” traced the massive growth in hunger to the 1981 budget cuts, particularly to housing subsidies, which the report explains forced low-income people to divert money from food to housing.

Showing that before the 1980s, food stamps and other anti-poverty programs meant that soup kitchens were not necessary. “In 1980,” the report cites, “there were only three emergency food programs in all of New York City, by 1995 this had grown to 800 and now there are over 1300.” They did not have figures for upstate New York, but they would show a similar trend. The report notes that these centers, originally used to provide emergency food in a crisis, have now become a way of life for many.

Further cuts in welfare benefits in 1996 by the Clinton administration and changes to eligibility rules for food stamps further increased hunger throughout the country. Immigrants and adults without children were cut or had their benefits drastically reduced.

In addition, the administration of Democratic governor Mario Cuomo cut tens of thousands of families from the food stamp rolls by forcing eligible recipients to go through unnecessary administrative red tape.

Deborah Zimmer said, “My husband retired from highway construction. He was a member of the iron workers’ union.” Referring to the food pantry, she said, “I never would have thought that I would have ended up having to go to these kind of things, but we have to

eat. It is wrong that the government is cutting food stamps. He can’t work any more, he did heavy work, lifting iron and concrete all his life, and his body is worn out.

“There used to be good jobs around here, but they are all gone. If there were jobs, then people could live based on their abilities, but now we have to live from day to day. I have seen the factories all move out of here. General Electric, Carrier, the candle factory. We still have all the pollution left from them, but not the production.”

Jay Bird explained: “They just cut \$11 from my food stamps, I used to get \$200 a month, I know \$11 doesn’t sound like much, but I have to split it with my sister, her husband and their children. That is a lot of people to feed, and it doesn’t last the month. We have cut out all our meat, but even vegetables cost a lot. The factories have moved overseas where they can get cheap labor while the rich still get rich.”

Brian McManus emphasized the impact of hunger on children. “There are children going hungry, children missing meals. This has a very detrimental effect on their growth, both physical and physiological. When a child doesn’t have enough to eat, he or she can’t concentrate in school and falls further behind their peers.”



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