

The face of food stamp cuts: Chicago, Illinois

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This is the second in a series of articles on the impact of food stamp cuts in the United States. See also, "The face of food stamp cuts: Jennifer - Portland, Oregon."

Over the past year, the Obama administration and the US Congress have slashed tens of billions of dollars from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as food stamps. The cuts, part of an overall attack on the social rights of the working class, come amidst rising hunger, homelessness and economic distress for tens of millions of people in the United States.

The impact of these cuts, felt across the country, is almost entirely outside the field of vision of the media. For the political establishment, issues of hunger and poverty are hardly mentioned—and if they are, it serves as nothing more than a theatrical gesture or campaign talking point. Democrats and Republicans all agree on the need for continued cuts in social programs like food stamps, even as the stock market soars to new heights and the wealth of the financial aristocracy is at record levels.

The city of Chicago, Illinois is no exception. According to Feeding America's 2014 Map the Meal Gap study, 15.3 percent of Chicagoans living in Cook County, nearly 800,000 people, were food insecure in 2012. The same study found that the food insecurity rate for the state of Illinois was 14.2 percent (1,833,810 individuals). These numbers have almost certainly risen over the past two years.

With the ending of emergency federal funding to SNAP last November, two million people in Illinois, or 16 percent of the state's population, had their access to food and nutritional assistance reduced. Monthly benefits have dropped by between \$19 and \$34, depending on income and household size. The supplemental benefit now stands at just \$1.40 per meal.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with visitors and staff of Chicago-area food pantries and Department of Human Services offices about the impact of the cuts.

Gina, a woman visiting a west side DHS office, said, "I lost \$11 a month in the November SNAP cuts. I've been unemployed for a while now, and SNAP is all I have.

"While they cut our benefits, food and gas prices and the cost of living are all rising. We pay more. And in neighborhoods like the one I live in, we don't have access to fresh meat and produce."

An Illinois DHS caseworker with seven years of experience described the growth of demand for food stamps, particularly among the "working poor." She explained, "I couldn't tell you the specific numbers off-hand. There has absolutely been a sharp increase in need. Many more people have come in to apply and it's working people period—not just people on welfare. People have to take from this or that to buy food. I think, you know what? Me too."

Speaking on the conditions in the DHS offices, she added, "The average caseload for a non-specialized DHS caseworker is well over 1,000. You just can't keep up with it."

The cuts to SNAP benefits have been compounded by cuts to pensions, disability benefits, lower wages and rising costs of living.

Shantera also lost \$11 a month from the November SNAP cuts. "Eleven dollars a month does make a difference. That is at least three meals worth of food we no longer have access to.

"Why can't they spend money on essential things like this? We need our food. Why take it from us?"

Eva spoke about her reliance on SNAP benefits and other social assistance, "I'm on disability. I was affected by the cuts to disability over a year ago and have had to rely on family members for assistance. Recently I went to get my tooth pulled, and they wouldn't do it because I didn't have a medical card."

Eva said she was assisting her daughter with the care of her two grandchildren, "It's a Catch-22. If Social Security knew I was living with her, they would cut our benefits."

The cuts to SNAP benefits have a reverberating impact throughout the economy. The cuts to food stamps are expected to cut into retail sales, threatening the closure of stores in poor areas and further limiting access.

"Food deserts"—large low-income areas where access to fresh produce and nutritious food is extremely scarce—is already a major problem, particularly after the closure of grocery chain Dominick's last January. Large swaths of the south and west sides of Chicago have no full-sized grocery retailers, and rural areas of Illinois are similarly affected.

A significant section of those who have had their SNAP benefits cut will turn to food pantries and other emergency food services to struggle to get adequate amounts of food each month.

Herman, a client at the Lakeview Pantry East location, said he now relies on the food pantry after the SNAP cuts. "I used to receive \$200 in food benefits before getting on supplemental security income. After that, I received \$33 a month on my Link card. Then they cut it back to \$20. Now I only receive \$17 a month." Herman said he used to be homeless and is currently living in subsidized housing.

Another Lakeview East client who asked not to be named said, "I have two children and a wife. It's been hard for me for the last six or seven years. The pantry really helps."

Pantry and food bank workers fear it will be impossible to keep up with the increased need. Demand at Cook County food pantries is up 70 percent over the past five years. According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors 2013 Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness, published at the end of last year, requests for emergency food assistance in Chicago increased by 6 percent in 2013.

The annual study also found that in many cases Chicago area food pantries for the first time in years have had to turn people away, reduce the quantity of food provided and reduce the number of times a person or family can visit each month.

Vincent, a Lakeview client told the WSW, "I just lost my job. I

been coming to the food pantry once every two months for food and three times a month for vegetables.” When asked about the November cuts to SNAP benefits, he said, “It’s less money. Less money means less food. The pantry has been filling the void. But more people are needing places like this. More people means more strain on these pantries. And this is happening everywhere.”

Many of the workers who spoke to the WSWs about the cuts to SNAP and their experience with food insecurity pointed to the increased burden, particularly on families with children. A Lakeview food pantry client who withheld her name pointed towards the building housing the food pantry and said, “*This* is what I think about it. If you have seven kids and they aren’t getting food in the schools, then you are really in trouble.”

The January 2014 Illinois School Breakfast Report by Share Our Strength’s No Child Hungry Campaign Illinois, reporting on the 2011-2012 school year, found that 22.7 percent of all children in Illinois (almost one in four) are food insecure. The same study found that 73 percent of Illinois teachers and principals report seeing students who regularly come to school discernibly hungry. Many teachers and faculty are so concerned that they resort to spending out of pocket to relieve student hunger, at an average cost of \$37 a month.

According to state data from the Food Research and Action Center, participation in free and reduced-price school lunches has increased 129.5 percent in the last ten years. In 2011-12 school year alone, 790,184 low-income students in Illinois qualified for free or reduced lunch and breakfast during the school year.

Seniors are another vulnerable demographic affected by decreased access to food stamps and essential social services, since retirees rely on fixed incomes and public benefits to meet their essential needs.

One pantry client said, “When my husband was still alive we received over \$200 in SNAP benefits [a year], now we are down to only \$15 a month. What can you do with \$15? Not a whole lot. Now I have to use my Social Security money to pay for food when I normally use that money to pay bills.

“They are cutting benefits and pensions while the costs of food and gas are going up. It’s terrible. I figure half of those people in there [the food pantry] depend exclusively on food pantries to get food. And families with five or six kids, I don’t know what they are going to do.”

The May 2012 Hunger Among Seniors in Cook County report by the Social IMPACT Research Center identified SNAP as the primary avenue of nutritional assistance for older adults in Illinois. Prior to the recent cuts, SNAP provided an average of 296 meals per person in need in Chicago (87 percent of total meals) and suburban Cook County 204 meals per person—90 percent of total meals.

Many seniors end up having to choose what is most important—food, medication or other basic necessities.

A Lakeview client who asked her name be withheld said, “For people with medical conditions, you either buy medicine or you buy food. You can’t afford both. Sometimes you’ll walk an extra half-hour just to save forty cents on the cost of food or transportation.”

Virginia, an older client at Lakeview Pantry East, said, “I never received SNAP benefits. I’m on Social Security. It’s not enough to both pay for food and all the other costs of living that are getting more expensive. Phone, electricity, gas, mortgage... it all went up. Everything goes up except your income.

“I applied for food stamps, but they said I had too much money. ‘Too much money’ that I have to visit the pantry each month for groceries!”

Virginia added, “Not long ago I had a heart attack shortly after I took out a second mortgage on my house. Hindsight is 20/20. Now I have to pay off that mortgage in order to stay in my house. One time my medication was over \$300 a month because there was no generic brand available. Now that there is a generic version, I can’t get it covered with my insurance.

“You work all of your life and think, ‘okay, now I can retire and won’t have to struggle in old age.’ But now more and more people are struggling, especially young people. They preach about the value of education, and young people leave college with astronomical debt and no opportunities for jobs in the fields they studied. And now they have to take jobs at Wal-Mart. It’s terrible. I have tried to get a job at Wal-Mart, but now all the people working there are college-age. I don’t want to take that away from them while they are struggling.”

Georgia, an elderly woman visiting the pantry, said, “I was receiving \$200 in monthly benefits. Now it has dropped to \$187, and I’m on a minimum income.”

Coleman is a resident of the Lathrop Homes on the west side of Chicago, one of the city’s historic public housing projects currently being cleared of its residents for renovation to attract new “mixed income” residents.

“I’ve nearly had a heart attack trying to plan on how I am going to move out,” Coleman said. “They are going to kick us all out by 2015. There are about a hundred of us left. The Chicago Housing Authority is waiting for that number to fall to around 75 in order to get a court order to shut it down completely.

“We used to get utilities free. Then they started charging \$25. Then fifty. Then seventy-five. I’ve seen ComEd [regional electric company] and People’s Gas already putting in meters to charge more for utilities in preparation for pushing residents out of the homes. Under [Mayor] Daley they said that they would give a third of the units back to us. They made a promise and they lied.”

On the cuts to SNAP benefits and the closure of affordable housing units, she said, “It’s all about the money. Forget about the little person.”

Workers visiting the DHS offices and food depositories expressed their general hostility to the Democrats and Republicans, and the immense growth of social inequality. James M. said, “inequality is intentional,” and is the result of “people with the means to concentrate wealth at the top” which workers “don’t have the means to counter.”

Eva added, “I’m 52. Things have gotten worse since I had my children. And things aren’t going to get better. I’ve come to realize that the political establishment doesn’t represent the people.”



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