

# Skyrocketing food prices are pinching budgets

Federal government has increased some subsidies, but has not kept up with inflation

By **LYNNE TERRY**  
Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — Oregonians and some state agencies are grappling with soaring food costs.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, retail food prices have jumped 8.6% in a year, including a 1% uptick in February. Anyone who's gone shopping has had sticker shock. Those who rely on public food benefits are especially vulnerable to rising prices.

The federal government increased the amount awarded to recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, in October, but not by much. School districts also have received some extra funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees school food programs.

But the state Department of Corrections, which spends \$1.1 million a month on food, has not received any extra funding. Officials have adjusted as best they can.

Higher fuel costs, rising freight charges and supply chain issues have driven up the cost of food over the past two years, officials said.

"Everything is driving the cost up," said Ashley Mumm, public relations manager at the Oregon Food Bank.

A few examples: In October, a truckload



Rachel Alexander/Salem Reporter, File

Soaring food prices have hit schools, the Department of Corrections and low-income Oregonians.

of canned chicken cost \$76,000. Now the price is \$95,000, Mumm said. Last June, a truckload of vegetable oil cost \$30,000. Now it's \$64,000.

The number of people seeking food aid also jumped dramatically once the pandemic hit. Normally, the Food Bank spends \$1 million a month on food. But it had to spend more to meet demand.

"At the peak of a pandemic, we were spending upwards of \$1 million a week on food purchases because of the disruptions to our regular food sourcing channels, coupled with the significant increase in demand for food assistance," said Jason Stephany, the Oregon Food Bank's communications

director. "We witnessed unprecedented demand."

The Food Bank received more than \$14 million for food for the 2021-2023 budget cycle through the state Department of Human Services. A total of \$12 million came from federal American Rescue Plan funds awarded during the pandemic. The Food Bank was also allocated an additional \$8 million during the recent legislative session. It will use that money for food and to strengthen its infrastructure, including renovating some warehouses to make them more efficient.

Mumm said that the agency has been able to meet demand in part thanks to donors.

"We had 25,000 new donors last year," Mumm

said. "The community is definitely stepping up."

Besides the Oregon Food Bank, which serves a network of 21 regional food banks that serve 1,400 food pantries and other programs, the other food assistance programs in Oregon are sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and administered by the state Department of Human Services.

Last fiscal year, from October 2020 through September 2021, the federal government gave Oregon \$18 million for a program that provides food to families with incomes of no more than about \$3,400 a month for an individual or nearly \$7,000 a month for a family of four. The USDA also gave Oregon nearly \$800,000 to provide monthly boxed allocations of food to those 60 and older.

Money from the fed-

eral government has been fairly stable, according to Jake Sunderland, press secretary for the Department of Human Services. He doesn't expect it to rise in the future.

## SNAP benefits increase

With the economy opening up and people going back to work, the number of households receiving government food aid has dropped — from more than 426,000 in January 2021 to nearly 378,000 a year later. Average aid per household rose, however, from about \$240 a household in January 2021 to \$280 in January 2022. Most of them received emergency food aid, which bumped up average household benefits from nearly \$400 a month in January 2022 to nearly \$465 a month.

The state has no ability to increase benefits more

than that, according to Sunderland.

"The federal government has designed these food programs so that we can only provide what is approved by the federal government," Sunderland said in an email. "It's also important to acknowledge and understand that SNAP is designed by the federal government as a program to supplement a family or individual's food budget. This means it is, by federal design, not enough to support an individual's or family's food needs."

The agency doesn't track food costs and has not acted to help low-income Oregonians cope with more recent inflationary food costs. But there is a federal program connected to SNAP that is administered through Oregon State University called SNAP Ed that offers classes in stretching food dollars.

"We try to help with teaching new strategies," said Anne Hoisington, nutrition education coordinator for the program.

Specialists teach classes and demonstrate recipes in food pantries, shelters, senior centers and elsewhere, though the program shifted online during the pandemic. Hoisington said traffic to the program's website, FoodHero.org, increased nearly 20% from September 2019 through June 2020.

The site offers tips to help stretch dollars, like buying in bulk when prices are lower and freezing portions. The current monthly newsletter has instructions on how to freeze vegetables by blanching them first. More tips: plan meals and shop with a list. The site lists dozens of low-cost recipes, including many designed to appeal to different ethnic and racial groups.

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