

Food stamp cuts hit hard — and harder still

BY JOANNE ZUHL
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Across Oregon, low-income families are adjusting to a little less, thanks to the national reduction in the food stamp program that went into effect Nov. 1.

We haven't seen the last of it.

Lawmakers in Washington D.C. are currently thrashing out two plans for the nutrition supplement program that's part of the 2013 Farm Bill, the host bill for the food stamp program administered through the Department of Agriculture. The Senate is proposing a \$4.1 billion cut to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, over the next 10 years. Republicans in the House are more heavy-handed, calling for \$40 billion over the same period. The axe is expected to fall somewhere in between, on top of the unprecedented Nov. 1 cuts that signaled the expiration of the 2009 stimulus package.

"Maybe these people need to spend a month, two months, six months and live on the same budget we have to live on and see just how hard it is to make ends meet," says Joe Van Der Heiden, who has lived on food stamps for the past three years. Multiple

physical and mental disabilities have prevented him from finding a job outside of selling Street Roots. The \$200 he received in food stamps comprised his entire food budget.

"It's really hard to explain to somebody who hasn't done it. People take for granted that they get a monthly paycheck that can pay their bills and put food on their table and don't have to worry about whether it's

nutritional enough, if it's filling, or how many meals they're going to get out of it."

On Nov. 1, Van Der Heiden's \$200 dropped to \$189. "I'm not going to be able to get as good nutritional food. I'm going to have to get filler," he says. "It's going to be eating a lot more Hot Pockets. It's \$10 for a box of 12, but that's six meals."

The cut prompted a wave of frantic calls to the state's resource call center, 211Info, according to the center's Matt Kinsella. The call center receives more than 275,000 calls each year from people needing help with housing, food supplies, energy assistance and health care. "People were confused about what their cut would be and upset because, for most of our callers, every dollar counts," Kinsella says. "Any cuts to one of Oregon's most vital safety net programs will have a significant impact."

Individual benefits vary according to each family's situation, but on average, a family of four with no other income, receiving \$668 in monthly SNAP benefits, lost \$36 a month in food assistance due to the expiration of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. With the cuts now in place, SNAP benefits pay \$1.40 per meal. At that figure, the \$36 amounted to more than a full week of meals.

In Oregon, about 800,000 individuals —

one in five Oregonians — are on food stamps, totaling \$1.2 billion in assistance. As such, Oregon has one of the highest rates of food stamp use in the nation, but the economic landscape tells the larger story, according to Belit Burke, SNAP program manager with the Oregon Department of Human Services.

"The unemployment rate is coming down, but people aren't working full time," Burke says. "They're making less money because they couldn't get back into the industry they came from. It's a combination of lower wages and less hours that are keeping people on the benefit."

Jeff Kleen, public policy advocate for the Oregon Food Bank, says the statewide network can't absorb the impact rolling out of these cuts. To cover the shortfall, the food bank would have to increase its inventory by 30 percent, Kleen says, this, for an organization that already delivers more than a million emergency food boxes across Oregon and Southwest Washington.

As is, SNAP benefits fall far short of the demand for food, according to Kleen.

"We do biannual surveys of people who are accessing emergency food boxes across the state and we ask what brought them there. The number one reason is their SNAP benefits have run out," Kleen says.

The recent round of cuts are unprecedented for their sweeping reductions for all recipients. The bills being considered in the House and Senate conference committee would cut costs, in part, by changing eligibility requirements, which could mean that in addition to reductions in benefits, millions of poor families could be simply dropped from the program altogether.

Rep. Suzanne Bonamici, D-Portland, voted with the minority against the \$40 billion package that emerged from the House. She disagrees with her fellow representatives that the local and faith communities can take up the slack from the cuts.

"They can't fill the need," says Bonamici. "A lot of people who benefit are children, they're seniors, they're veterans. To take food out of the mouths of children and seniors is wrong. It's the wrong place to be cutting."

Rep. Kurt Schrader, who is serving on the conference committee to reconcile the House and Senate versions, did not return

our calls as of press time.

Bonamici says even the \$4 billion reduction proposal from the Senate could be catastrophic for people needing the assistance.

"We have too much food insecurity in Oregon and across the country," she said. "We should not be cutting nutrition assistance."

In addition to families, the cuts to SNAP have an impact on the wider economy. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which manages the program, calculates that for every \$5 of SNAP benefits spent, there is \$9.20 of total economic activity.

And as a consequence, the Multnomah County is bracing for higher demands on its own resources for low-income families as people begin to balance their trade-offs.

Local governments are under enormous pressure to respond to local need and have suffered through several rounds of budget cutting," says Liesl Wendt, who is serving as interim County Commissioner for the campaigning Deborah Kafoury. Wendt is on leave from her work with the state's self-sufficiency programs at the Department of Human Services, and she is also a former policy advocate for the Oregon Food Bank. "Throughout the county, there are large pockets of people who are hurting and trying to rebuild their lives following the economic downturn. Having additional cuts during this time negatively impacts the entire community and hurts both people in need and local businesses at precisely the time local government is starting to recover."

As for allegations of fraud in the program, which the proponents of major cuts have pushed forward, Burke says it's very rare. In fact, she says, despite the high numbers or recipients drawing the attention, the stigma attached to food stamps actually keeps some qualified people away.

"These are our friends and neighbors. They are people that we know. They're ashamed of being on the program," Burke says. "They're the biggest critics. Nobody wants to come in and apply for government help. The biggest population that we hurt when this kind of stuff happens is the elderly. They don't want to be associated with stigma. A lot of people who need benefits won't get benefits."



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