

In Tough Times, Food Stamps Leave Many Hungry

by Michelle Chan

Monday, August 29, 2011 12:00 AM



Photo by [Just Food NYC](#) As monthly benefits run out, hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers turn to food pantries.

William Henry expends a lot of energy to try to stretch his \$50 in food stamps for an entire month. "It takes discipline to make sure that the money lasts when I go to the supermarket. I have to take my calculator," he said.

But despite his best efforts, Henry does not always succeed. "Most months there are four weeks, and once in a while it's five," he said. "Sometimes in the fifth week the money runs out, and that's when I go to a pantry."

The [West Side Campaign Against Hunger](#) operates one such pantry. It gives emergency food aid to people who need to supplement their monthly food stamp benefits. Located in the basement of the [Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew](#), the pantry serves a variety of customers. Many of them wait patiently in lines that snake around the basement and out the door. When called on, the clients select fresh and canned food from shelves in a back room.

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The West Side Campaign Against Hunger is one of many private organizations that play a pivotal role in feeding New York City's hungry. With many people who need aid not receiving food stamps -- and with the benefits too small to cover the expenses of many of those who do -- private, nonprofit organizations provide an increasing amount of food assistance in New York City. A number of organizations say they simply cannot handle the task -- and should not have to.



In this series, Gotham Gazette will look at what government is — and is not — doing to combat poverty in the city. We will examine specific problems and the policies that address or contribute to them.

Some 1.8 million New Yorkers — about one in five — lives at or below the poverty level, with 10.5 percent trying to scrape by in deep poverty — with incomes less than half the poverty level, or below \$10,500 for a family of four.

Over the past five years, the poverty level has remained largely unchanged. Meanwhile, the wealthy in our city have gotten richer, leaving New York with the widest income divide of any major city in the country.

Against this backdrop, all levels of government have sought to cut spending, reducing programs for the poor and raising fees. This has tattered a social safety net that, even in the best of times, had gaps and tears.

Previously in the series:

[Incarcerated with Children](#) : Thousands of city kids have parents in prison. Can their bonds survive the separation and stigma?

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[Paying the Rent with HIV](#) : The city program to help people with HIV/AIDS find stable housing still leaves some New Yorkers facing almost impossible choices.

[Beyond Their Means](#) : Increases in tuition and cuts in financial aid may put City University, long a road to the middle class, out of reach for low-income New Yorkers.

[A Poor Defense](#) : In, New York many public defenders barely talk to their indigent clients â€“ let alone fight for them.

[Shutting a 'Safety Net'](#) The closing of St. Vincent's created a void for some poor New Yorkers and highlighted the woes facing hospitals that serve them.

[New York's Model](#) : On one hand, the mayor has cut city social services. On the other, he has launched private pilot projects to fight poverty â€“ to little effect. Glenn Pasanen explores the disconnect.

"Ending hunger is a huge priority, and charity cannot and should not shoulder the bulk of this burden," Joel Berg, the executive director of the [New York Coalition Against Hunger](#) wrote in the coalition's [annual hunger survey](#)

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A Shift in Responsibility

Some 2.3 million New Yorkers â€“ or 12.4 percent of all state residents -- faced food insecurity in 2007 to 2009, a sharp increase from the 9.4 percent in the three previous years, according to [Hunger Action Network of New York State](#)

. In February the number of state residents receiving food stamps hit a record 3 million, a 65 percent increase over five years, the Daily News [reported](#)

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In the city, about 1.8 million residents get food stamps. The programs purchased more than

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\$3.2 billion worth of food in the city in 2010, according to the Coalition Against Hunger.

While participation in the food stamp program -- officially known as the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) -- has been increasing, U.S. Department of Agriculture [statistics from 2008](#) found that only 53 percent of all New Yorkers eligible for food stamps in 2008 actually got them. This "and the shortfall in benefits -- [compels](#) some 2.3 million state residents to seek emergency food aid every year.

In its [2010 Hunger Survey](#), the Coalition Against Hunger reported that demand at the city's more than 1,100 food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City increased 6.8 percent from 2009 to 2010, in addition to the 20.8 percent increase from 2008 to 2009. The fasting growing need for services came from families with children.

The need for private assistance has been growing since the Reagan administration, according to a [study](#) by Beth Osborne Daponte of Yale University and Shannon Bade, a senior organizer at the [Organization of the North East](#) in Chicago. It [dropped](#) tens of thousands of Americans from the food stamp program, a federal program administered by states and cities. Then the Clinton-era changes in the welfare system under the [Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act](#), tightened eligibility requirements and decreased the monthly benefits. Closer to home, in 1997, New York City began requiring anyone applying for food stamps be fingerprinted in order to prevent fraud.

All this forces some needy people them to turn to private groups. The increasing reliance on the non-profit organizations concerns many who run them.

"The myth we're up against is civil society and nonprofits around the city can take over the burden from the public sector whose job it is," said Michael Paone, the community organizer for the Coalition Against Hunger. He added that while private agencies have great intentions, they "lack agility" to deal with the city's hunger problem.

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"This is the wrong prescription for the problem," said Paone. "It's a much larger and deeper issue than just creating more food programs. Creating jobs and taking people out of poverty is the real solution."

The Dollar Forty-Eight Menu

The [maximum food stamp benefit](#) for a family of four in fiscal year 2010 was \$668 a month, with the average recipient now getting \$133.80 — or about \$4.46 a day. To receive benefits, a family's income must be no higher than 130 percent of federal poverty guidelines, or roughly \$2,389 a month for a family of four in most of the country.

A number of [restrictions](#) exist on what recipient can use their food stamps for -- although the federal government recently [rejected](#) a [bid](#) by the Bloomberg administration to ban their use for the purchase of sugary soft drinks. The benefit cannot be used for food bought in restaurants, alcohol, non-food items, including soap, or food purchased hot.

In late 2010, City Council Member [Ydanis Rodriguez](#) ate for five days on the average food stamp benefit — about \$4 a day. "I usually was out of money by lunchtime, my ability to concentrate suffered, and by Friday, I had no other choice but to go to a food pantry for extra food," he later [wrote](#) .



Photo by [Walmart Stores](#) The Food Bank for New York is among the largest of the private organizations that help feed tens of thousands of New Yorkers.

At times during the week he cooked rice and other dried goods to stave off hunger but he was unable to afford "vegetables, fruits, dairy and protein." He added, "I do not need to repeat what we already know — that it is impossible to still eat a healthy balanced diet off \$4.33 per day."

Increasing the Rolls

For many New Yorkers, though, that \$4.33 would help — yet they either have not applied for or

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have not received food stamps. A number of things might account for this, Sandra Jean-Louis, the director of the Access to Health and Food Benefits program at [Public Health Solutions](#) told City Council in 2010.

"Many are not aware of the requirements. For others, English is a second language and they require help completing the application form. More are too ashamed to accept government assistance. Others may fear that accepting food stamps will lead to their deportation," she said. Jean-Louis also noted that "procedural barriers," such as not being able to find the food stamp office, difficulties with the application or being asked unnecessary questions during the food stamp interview, also keep some New Yorkers from receiving benefits.

The Bloomberg administration has said it has tried to reach out to possible recipients and make it easier for them to get food stamps. During a City Council hearing on hunger, [Human Resources](#)

Commissioner Robert Doar testified that his agency has developed partnerships with community-based organizations that take applications for food stamps and then submit them to Human Resources Administration electronically. The agency's outreach staff also visits community-based organizations to conduct interviews and help submit applications for food assistance.

Doar has noted that changes to the recertification process make it far more convenient. Recipients used to have to have their eligibility for food stamps checked and renewed every six months. Now that has been extended to once a year. In addition, the recertification interviews now can be conducted over the phone rather than in person. And to make fresh fruits and vegetables more available to recipients, city greenmarkets started [accepting](#) Electronic Benefit Transfers at farmer's markets.

All of this may have contributed to the rise in food stamp use. The number of people getting food stamps in both the state and city increased by between 12 to 13 percent between 2009 and 2010 and "almost 65 percent" since 2006, Elizabeth Berlin of the state [Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance](#) told City Council last year.

Doar said that he was "stunned" to hear participation rates rose by 60 to 70 percent. "That would be amazing. I hope it happened," he said.

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SNAP Barriers

Advocates attribute the increase in the number of people receiving benefits more to rising need than to a better effort by the government. "SNAP is a countercyclical program. During recessions it's there to respond to need and enroll as many people as needed," said Hannah Lupien, a food policy strategist at West Side Coalition Against Hunger.

She and other advocates say the government has to do more to ensure all who are eligible for SNAP receive aid, and they charge that some city rules drive away participants. For example, New York City requires applicants seeking food stamp benefits to undergo a fingerprint imaging process, even as the state has discontinued this policy. Joel Berg has cited studies finding one in 23 people did not apply for food stamps because of the finger-imaging policy but that the fingerprints detected only 31 cases of fraud in 2006 — or one for every 35,000 people.

In a testimony before City Council, Doar [defended](#) this policy saying it was designed to prevent recipients from receiving duplicate benefits.

Lupien finds that hard to believe. "When is the only other time you get fingerprinted?" she asked. "When you're arrested! It's a loud and clear message that applicants are not to be trusted because they're poor or because they're asking for help."

"Why should we have to take fingerprints? We didn't commit a crime. I don't think it should be a policy that people must be fingerprinted in order to eat. If people don't want to do it they will starve," said Gloria B., a member of the Coalition Against Hunger's Food Action Board who asked that her last name not be used. "It's not a crime to ask for food. It's not a crime to lose a job."

Not everyone objects to the finger imaging. Lotrina Kinsey, a customer at the West Side Coalition Against Hunger's pantry said that fingerprint imaging was "normal." The long waits, finger imaging policy and application process were "to be expected. It is an all day process and very time consuming," she said.

Picking Up the Slack

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Whatever the reasons, many people in these difficult times turn to private groups to get help to feed themselves and their families. This has put a strain on those organizations.

Of all the agencies in the city, 51.4 percent were unable to meet demand in 2010, a smaller percentage than the previous year. Despite the decrease, 42 percent said a lack of resources forced them to turn away hungry people, cut portions or reduce hours, according to the Hunger Survey Report. When that happens, Paone said, "Often times agencies will indeed give referrals to other agencies. It's not uncommon for folks to patronize multiple agencies -- and when food is scarce, they have to 'shop around' even more."

At the West Side campaign's food pantry, Zoila Estrella, a volunteer, customer and food stamp recipient, said that her benefit usually lasts most of the month largely because she only has to support herself. "Food stamp benefits need to be increased for those who need and use it," she said through a translator, "especially for bigger families, families with children and the working poor."

"So many people are going through a hard time, and it's not easy when you have bills to pay. I know the government is trying to do a lot but it's still not enough," said Gloria B. "Even soup kitchens are getting low and children are crying. America has a lot of money, people shouldn't be that hungry."