

# **The Food Stamp Program:**

## **Our Nation's Defense Against Hunger**

Families Speak Out About  
Food Stamp Reauthorization

Northwest Federation of Community Organizations



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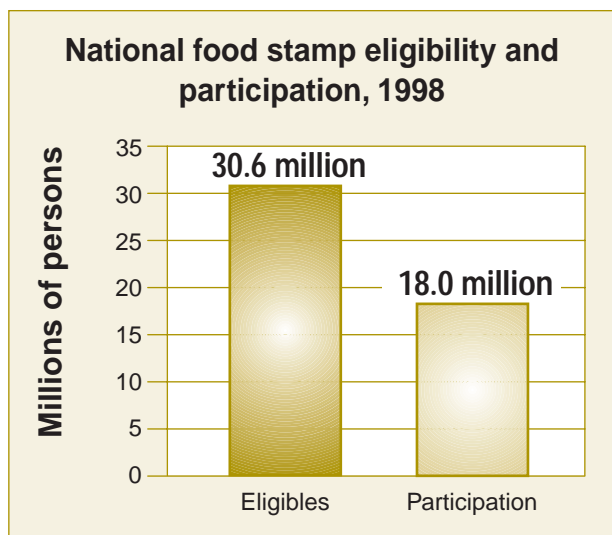
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## INTRODUCTION

When we heard that the Food Stamp Program was due for reauthorization this year, we thought, “**FINALLY!**” It has been five years since Congress modified the Food Stamp Program and since then our lives have not been the same.

In 1996, politicians, bureaucrats, and the media told us that the whole welfare system — including food stamps — needed to be “reformed.” In some ways, we agreed. Food stamp benefit levels had fallen behind the times and needed to be updated to reflect how families live today. But to Congress, reform meant cutting \$28 billion dollars from the program.



Source: Allen Schirm, *Reaching Those in Need: Food Stamp Participation in 1998*, United States Department of Agriculture, July 2000. <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/PDFs/fnsbrochure.pdf>

It has been our experience that welfare reforms in 1996 put too much emphasis on reducing caseloads instead of reducing hunger and poverty in this country. Congress cut benefits to legal immigrants and the unemployed, reduced the benefit amounts to other groups, and we began running into burdensome barriers when applying for the program. During this time, hunger continued to be a painful part of our lives. Jobs were more plentiful, but few of them paid a living wage, requiring us to make hard choices between food, shelter, and health care.

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We've assembled these stories to give people a sense of what welfare reform meant to those of us who need the Food Stamp Program. Most of our stories focus on two distinct themes: either we are not getting the sufficient benefits we need to feed our families or we are encountering barriers in the enrollment process that hinder us from fully completing the application process. Many times, we face both challenges.

### **THE PROCESS THAT IT TAKES TO ACTUALLY GET BENEFITS IS COMPLICATED AND TOUGH.**

We need food stamp benefits to feed our families, yet we are forced to jump through so many hoops to get these benefits. Sometimes it doesn't even seem like it's worth it. If you have a reliable car, forget about getting food stamps. If you have a job or transportation problems, good luck in getting to the food stamp office during their office hours. One family in our story collection had their benefits over-calculated and when they reported the problem, the state agency took away their benefits and made it hard for their family to eat. You are considered lucky if you can get your benefits without having to go back and forth to the office more than three times or wait less than a week to hear back from your caseworker. As for emergency food stamps, forget about it, it's as if they don't exist.

**FOOD STAMP BENEFITS DON'T ADEQUATELY MEET OUR FOOD NEEDS.** Getting \$10 a month in food stamps is pointless. When we do get benefits, they rarely last us the whole month. Families are lucky if they can get their benefits to last more than one trip to the grocery store. We skip meals or eat less so that our children can eat. If someone in our family has a special diet that requires more expensive foods, food stamps rarely provides us with enough money to buy the food we need.

We are the real face of hunger in this country. We deserve a Food Stamp Program that respects our needs and rights and provides us with sufficient benefits to feed our families.

### BONNIE CHAMBERS LYNNWOOD, WASHINGTON



**M**y husband, James, and I have four children between the ages of one and 15. James used to work at Boeing and made a decent living as a drafter, making over \$15 an hour with benefits.

In 1999 he was laid off, and since then he has had a difficult time finding work. The last job he held was at Rite Aid, working for \$10 an hour. However, he had to quit because his schedule kept getting switched around and we were paying too much in daycare when we both had to work at the same time.

# *Bonnie*

We are receiving food stamps, but not enough. When James was working at Rite Aid and bringing home about \$1,300 a month (for a family of six), we received \$120 in food stamps. James and I only ate one meal a day then. We were always hungry and felt extremely malnourished. We wanted our children to eat, so we didn't. Now that James is out of work our food stamp amount has gone up, but not by very much. We go to the food bank, but you can only go once a month. Plus we don't have a car, which makes it difficult because the food bank is not close by. If my family had enough to eat, things would be less stressful and we would be able to do more to change our situation. I always feel like I am dealing with crisis after crisis now instead of making progress.

*James and I only ate one meal a day then. We were always hungry and felt extremely malnourished. We wanted our children to eat, so we didn't.*



### YOLANDA HERNANDEZ KENT, WASHINGTON

I am 26 years old and a single mother of my son, Kerrigan, who is four. I am working about 37 hours a week at an assisted living home for the elderly, right down the street from where I live. I bring home about \$900 a month after taxes. Currently I am on food stamps, but I only get \$10 a month to help with food expenses. This amount just isn't enough when I am paying for rent, utilities and other expenses, like keeping a growing boy in clothes that fit him. I only eat two small meals a day; I always put my son first, and he needs to eat so that he grows up healthy and strong.

# *Yolanda*



I would like to go to school and work part time so that I can get out of working minimum or just over minimum wage jobs, but I cannot cut down on my hours to do this. I need every penny to get by. If I got a food stamp benefit that actually reflected what I take home and not what I make before taxes, I would get more food stamps and be able to eat regular meals. I shouldn't have to skip meals when I am working hard and doing everything I can to provide a home for my son.

*I would like to go to school and work part time so that I can get out of working minimum or just over minimum wage jobs, but I cannot cut down on my hours to do this. I need every penny to get by.*



### CAROL ANN HOVLAND LOLO, MONTANA

**M**y name is Carol Ann Hovland and I am a disabled woman living in a small town near Missoula, Montana. I have a limited income of \$548 a month, which comes from both Disability and Social Security. In addition to this money, I have a Section 8 subsidy for my housing, and I currently receive \$36 a month in food stamps.

Most months the food stamp benefits are all I have to buy food. My income barely covers my rent, utilities, medications, upkeep of my car, and household and personal items that food stamps cannot be used for. With increasing utility costs, my income probably won't even cover these necessities next winter.

# *Carol Ann*

The lack of enough food stamps has had a big impact on my life. I eat mostly carbohydrates because that is all I can afford to buy. I get very little protein, and as a result, I am tired all the time. My overall health has deteriorated and my immune system doesn't protect me like it should. Living with a disability has impacted my life enough; not having enough food and a balanced diet is an added burden that I should not have to face. I believe that if I was able to receive more assistance, I could eat a more nutritious diet, allowing me to improve my health and quality of life.

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**KIM BENNETT**  
**MEDFORD, OREGON**

**I** am 33 years old and married with two children. Currently my family is homeless and we are staying with friends. I have diabetes, among other health problems, and I am unable to work.

While I am trying to feed my family, I must also watch my own diet very closely. As an insulin-dependent diabetic, I need to eat the right foods such as a lot of fruits and vegetables and sugar-free foods for diabetics. Unfortunately, these foods are very expensive and I cannot afford them. When I am unable to eat the foods I need, I get very sick. Twice in the last year I have fallen into a coma, and I don't know how much more my body can take.

*Kim*

The stress of both feeding my family and trying to supply myself with the special-needs diet I require deteriorates my health even more. I want to continue to be there for my two children, but at times I get very discouraged. If we were getting more food stamps and the application and re-certification processes weren't so daunting, I feel that I would be in a better position to support my family and take care of my health needs.

*As an insulin-dependent diabetic, I need to eat the right foods such as a lot of fruits and vegetables and sugar-free foods for diabetics. Unfortunately, these foods are very expensive and I cannot afford them.*



### TAMMY BRADBURN LYNNWOOD, WASHINGTON

**M**y name is Tammy Bradburn and I am a proud mother of a five-year-old daughter and a three-year-old son. My husband, Ken, and I used to run a carpet and upholstery cleaning business. It was successful for quite a while and we were even able to buy our own home. Recently, the business has suffered and we cannot afford our house anymore. We have no savings, because it takes a while for a business to turn a profit. Our house is now being foreclosed and my family is lucky enough to have a friend who will take us in. I had no choice but to apply for food stamps at the Welfare office.

# *Tammy*

The amount of difficulty I had even applying for food stamps, let alone receiving them, was unbearable as I watched my family go hungry. I had to wait a week for an appointment, which meant five more days without food. I was then informed that I did not have the correct documents, and had to come back in another three days. In the end, I only could get \$234 each month. That amount of money does not provide enough food for the four of us. My worker stated that because we weren't paying rent, our benefit amount was lowered. In addition, I found out that there are supposed to be emergency food stamps available for people like us who were in a crisis. When I questioned my caseworker, she stated that there wasn't any program like that.

My children, my husband, and I had to go hungry for a week and a half. The excess amount of paperwork that has to be done in order to get food stamps and to the lack of appointment time at the office are barriers that keep my family from eating. I hope that these barriers are broken down so that another child does not have to go another day without food.

*The excess amount of paperwork that has to be done in order to get food stamps in addition to the lack of appointment time at the office are barriers that keep my family from eating.*



### QUANG TRAN LYNNWOOD, WASHINGTON

I came to Seattle from Vietnam in 1992 with my four children, ages eight through 17, and my mother. I became a legal citizen of the United States in 1997. I am a single mom raising my four children completely on my own. When I first came here I found a job working on the assembly line at Boeing. I made \$15 an hour and had health benefits as well. I even worked seven days a week in order to save money. Then in December of 1999 I was laid off along with many other workers at Boeing. I cried when I got that pink slip because I knew that it was going to be hard to find another job as good as that one.

When I was laid off I received the maximum amount of unemployment because I had worked 7-day weeks. I decided to take the opportunity to go to a vocational school and become a beautician because I heard they made a decent living. I was having trouble finding a job that paid well and I knew that I could not support my family on minimum wage. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find a decent-paying job cutting hair and right now I make about \$890 a month.

# Quang



I recently applied for food stamps to help with the expense of living. I was not going to receive my first paycheck for a month after my unemployment stopped and I could not feed my family without help. I went into the office to get an application for food stamps and I filled it out and returned it right away. I was told to wait for a letter in the mail that would tell me when to come in for an interview with a caseworker. Ten days later, I received the letter and went in for my interview a couple days after that. During the interview I was told that I needed to bring back more paperwork for my application. I returned the following day with the paperwork and it was put with my application. I did not hear anything back from my caseworker so I returned to the office four more times over the next two weeks. I needed to know if I would qualify because if I didn't I was going to have to get a second job to pay for food. Each time I went to office I was told that no one knew anything about my application and I would have to call my caseworker. I had tried to call my caseworker, but all I ever got was the answering machine.

Finally, on my seventh visit to the food stamp office, I asked to speak to a supervisor or someone who knew anything about my application. I was told that I could only see another caseworker between 1:00 and 3:00 p.m. I explained I could not do that because I worked from 11:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m.

I was able to see another worker and she told me that my caseworker had been on vacation. She said I should qualify so she gave me my food stamp card. I had to call to activate the card when I returned home. I tried that day, but was told that my application had not been processed. I kept trying and three days later I was told that money would be on my card by that evening.

I don't understand why it is so difficult to apply for food stamps. I do not think that families should have to wait a month like I did just to get food stamps when they have no money and no food. I am working full time, but I make such low wages that I do not make enough money to pay all of my bills and buy food for my family. The Food Stamp Program is necessary for my family to afford enough food to eat.

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### TRACEY ROMERO BILLINGS, MONTANA

**M**y name is Tracey Romero and I am a single mother raising 12-year-old and two-year-old daughters. I currently receive \$145 in food stamps per month, an amount that barely gets us through a few weeks. Towards the end of the month I am often forced to pawn something in order to buy food for my family. I always make sure that my children eat first; I frequently skip a meal in order to guarantee at least a little bit of nourishment for my growing girls. I have even tried to get food donations in the past, but what I received was really old and out-of-date, so I don't use that method anymore. My two children have unfortunately gone to bed many nights with empty stomachs.

# *Tracey*

Because I have no car, I have to shop at the local grocery store, where the prices are extremely high. If I am able to, I travel to another store about three miles from my apartment. But because I am disabled with a bad back, I cannot always go the distance.

My caseworker recently informed me of some changes in the system. If utilities are included in the rent, our food stamp benefits will be reduced. For us, this means we lose \$49 a month, therefore, only having \$96 to use for food. I don't know how we will survive then. If the food stamp system would reevaluate their guidelines, we could get a sufficient amount of food, and we would not have to go hungry another night.

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### EMILY JONES GARDEN CITY, IDAHO

I live in a small trailer with my son, his wife, her 12-year-old daughter, and my eight-month-old grandbaby. I have a pace maker and I am unable to work due to my heart condition. My son has a mental disability and cannot have a job. He works on cars for a little bit of money, and his wife has a part-time job. All of their money goes to medical bills that they have accrued over the years. That means that the whole family is dependent on the \$800 that I receive every month from SSI and my widow's pension. I have to pay for rent, utilities, loan repayments, and my over-the-counter drug costs with this money. After everything is paid for, I have very little money left over for food.

# *Emily*

Fortunately, we get help from the food stamp program; unfortunately our family gets only \$10 a month in food stamps. That hardly buys anything! I'm supposed to be on a low-fat, low-sodium diet, but I can't afford all of the healthy foods that I should be eating. I never get fruits and vegetables, and neither do my grandchildren, because we cannot afford them on food stamps. My son and his wife try to help as much as they can with groceries, but we're just not able to get a healthy diet with the money that we have.

*I'm supposed to be on a low-fat, low-sodium diet, but I can't afford all of the healthy foods that I should be eating.*

*I never get fruits and vegetables, and neither do my grandchildren, because we cannot afford them on food stamps.*



### JANE ROMICH BOISE, IDAHO

**M**y name is Jane Romich, and I am a disabled widow with the responsibility of taking care of two teenage boys. I have a monthly income of \$583 in addition to receiving \$267 in child support for my grandsons. I have rent and utilities to pay for every month in addition to paying a debt to my bank and Social Security for an overpayment that they mistakenly made to me. Add that to a little money that I donate to my church and other miscellaneous costs that inevitably come up for a family, and I have very little money left over for food. We depend on our food stamp benefit for our grocery needs.

# *Jane*

I have congestive heart failure, cardio-artery disease, and an ulcer. On top of all that, I am an insulin-dependent diabetic. I need to eat a low-fat, low-sodium, low-sugar diet. That means a lot of fresh produce, lean meats, and high fiber grains. The \$133 a month I receive in food stamps is hardly enough to feed two teenage boys and a special health diet.

I have to make my food money stretch, and cheap bulk food is not necessarily what I need to be eating, but it's all that I can afford to put in our stomachs. I appreciate all the help that food stamps provide, but I just wish that I could get a little bit more so that I could feed my boys and myself healthy meals.

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### WILLIAM MARKEY PORTLAND, OREGON



**M**y name is William Markey, and I am a 51-year-old homeless man. After moving to Portland several months ago to live with an old friend, I was dealt an unlucky set of cards, as my new roommate was forced to move because of his job. Alone in a new city with nowhere to stay, I found myself living on the streets, struggling to regain my life. When I'm lucky, I can go to work with a company that hires day laborers, yet this is only temporary and there is no chance for advancement. As a result, I have no consistent income. I work with an advocate at a center to help homeless people and do volunteer work around the building in order to rent a locker to store my personal belongings. With zero income, I receive \$130 a month in food stamps.

# *William*



I am very appreciative of the food stamp help, but as a homeless individual, I run into a variety of barriers to using them. I do not have access to a major grocery store, so I must rely on more expensive and less nutritional food from convenience stores. A large grocery store is a bus ride away, and for someone with no income, accessing this type of transportation is a huge obstacle. Thus, the food stamps only last me a couple of weeks. In addition, because I have no home, I have no place to cook or store my food.

I am a persistent man, and I believe that I could get a good job, but it would take a couple months before I had enough saved to pay for rent. When I begin working, I will no longer qualify for food stamps. If the barriers that exist for a homeless man to eat and live a healthy lifestyle could somehow be eliminated, I would be able to get back on my own two feet, get a job, and support myself the best way I know how.

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### REBECCA MEE CALDWELL, IDAHO



I have four children ages eleven months to 7 years. My husband, Patrick, changed jobs to benefit our family last year. He became partial owner of a business and our income has gone down considerably. We don't see a paycheck until the employees and all the bills are paid. In the long run we should be doing well, but right now our family of six is living on \$650 a month. It is impossible for me to get a job because any money I would earn would have to go for childcare costs. We are behind on all of our bills and had to turn our gas off in March because we couldn't afford it.

# *Rebecca*

We qualify for food stamps and other assistance programs according to our income, but our eligibility was denied due to the value of our vehicle. We have a large, dependable van that suits the needs of our family that is valued at about \$9,900. Our caseworker at Health and Welfare has suggested that we find a dealership that will appraise it for less, but we have taken good care of it and haven't had any luck. To sell our van would be a loss for us and wouldn't make any sense because it is our only means of transportation. I am unable to feed my family a good balanced diet on my husband's income. Meat and fresh fruits and vegetables are impossible to afford without the help of food stamps. If only our van was not included as a part of our income, my family would be well fed.

*We qualify for food stamps and other assistance programs according to our income, but our eligibility was denied due to the value of our vehicle.*

*If only our van was not included as a part of our income, my family would be well fed.*



### MARIA MARTINEZ\* IDAHO

**M**y husband and I have five children ages nine months to nine years. Only my husband works, and he is employed seasonally at temporary places. Last month he made \$1,170, but his monthly income varies, and he could make more or less than that. We are really struggling because we don't have enough money to buy sufficient food for our family. Oftentimes this forces us, and sometimes our children, to eat less or skip meals. Participating in the food program at ICAN has helped us a great deal, but it is not enough. I want to feel secure that my family will be full at every meal, every day.

# *Maria*

We were informed about the Food Stamp Program through the Department of Health and Welfare. Unfortunately, an INS employee told us that we were not able to apply for food stamps because our immigration status could be harmed. Right now my eldest son and I are in the process of legalizing our U.S. status and I do not want an application for food stamps to get in the way. However, my family is hungry and I do not feel that my children are getting the proper nutrition they need. They are young and need fresh fruits and vegetables to grow up healthy.

Right now I do not know what I am going to do. I am grateful for the food program at ICAN, but my family is still going hungry. We are in need of more assistance, but I just cannot see a way for us to get help from the government because of our immigration status.

\* Name withheld by request.

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### JUDIE SHELBY BILLINGS, MONTANA

**M**y name is Judie Shelby and I am a 59-year-old woman who just completed school for my second bachelor's degree. Unfortunately, I fell and broke my hip last year, and the long, painful road to recovery has made it extremely difficult to find a job. I live alone on \$530 a month plus the extra help of \$60 a month in food stamps. Sixty dollars does not provide a month's worth of food and I am unable to afford fresh food and all the nutrients my body needs to heal correctly. With the food stamp money, I can only afford to buy meat substitutes, dry milk, a variety of cheap canned foods and no vegetables. I'm glad to be able to buy some food because my \$530 a month isn't enough, but I need more food than \$60 allows me to buy.

# *Judie*

Last year my food stamps did not arrive in the mail one month. I waited about five days and then contacted my caseworker to find out what to do. I was informed that I had to wait until my food stamps came next month and that there wasn't anything else they could do for me. They told me that if I tried to get them again this month, they would kick me off the system.

I had no choice but to call the local director of the Office of Public Assistance. The director agreed to send me my food stamps for that month, but from then on I had to receive the food stamps via certified mail. This forces me to wait home the first few days at the beginning of every month or I will miss the mailman. Since I do not have an affordable means of transportation, if I miss the mailman I have to try to arrange a ride to the post office.

Food stamps are important to me and getting them late means I have to stretch the \$60 even further. I am grateful for the assistance that I already receive, but if I could increase the amount, even just a little, and obtain the food stamps on time, I wouldn't have to go to bed and wake up hungry.

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### TERESA ANDERSON

**M**y name is Teresa Anderson and I am a survivor of domestic violence. A few years ago I ended an abusive relationship and began my life again, with two kids and three empty stomachs. I now work full time and earn an average of \$900 a month. I am fortunate enough to have my ten- and twelve-year-old sons with me every other weekend and during the summers, yet ill-fated in the sense that I do not have enough to feed them or myself. Luckily, I receive food stamps and medical benefits, but it continues to be a constant battle to obtain the benefits for which I am eligible.

# *Teresa*



I currently only take in \$10 a month in food stamps, which lasts only one trip to the grocery store, leaving myself and my children hungry and malnourished. In addition to all the paperwork I initially filled out, I must go to the AFS office in order to make the necessary changes and fill out more paperwork to add my boys as dependants during the summertime when they live with me. This is extremely hard to do when I work full-time. By the time the boys return to their father's house at the end of the summer, I have only just begun to see an increase in my food stamps. In addition, every month, I must call a number to verify that my benefits are still available. If the food stamps are not, I have to contact my caseworker before she finally authorizes my ten dollar benefits, yet she rarely returns my many phone calls and written messages. A sign hangs on the wall of the AFS that states a guarantee of a certain amount of time a caseworker has to get back to you, but as seen in my case, these words are just fallacy.

I know that I am not alone in feeling an overwhelming amount of frustration with not being able to access enough food to feed myself and my family. The barriers that exist within the food stamp system, such as the endless paperwork and the repetitive phone calls, need to be evaluated and eliminated so that people with similar situations to my own do not go to bed hungry.

*A sign hangs on the wall of the AFS that states a guarantee of a certain amount of time a caseworker has to get back to you, but as seen in my case, these words are just fallacy.*



### SAMANTHA WATKINS WASHINGTON

I am a single mother of three children ages 18 months to four years old. I recently moved from New Mexico to Washington state after the doctors said that my daughter, Jade Lynn, would have to be moved to a lower altitude or she would die. My daughter has many health problems and needed to be attached to an oxygen machine in New Mexico. Right now Jade Lynn is in a home for medically fragile children because there is a shortage of home health care nurses in Washington and there are no daycare centers available for children like Jade. My greatest wish is that my daughter will be able to come home soon.

# *Samantha*

My son, John, is lactose intolerant and is extremely allergic to milk in particular. He cannot have any products that contain milk, not even certain breads. He is three years old, so he needs calcium and protein to grow. I have to buy him soymilk with calcium and other special foods that don't have milk in them. These foods are more expensive and I have to spend an extra \$50 a month to make sure he gets the protein and calcium that he needs from other non-milk products. I only make about \$700 a month right now, so I need food stamps to make up for the cost of food. When I told DSHS that I needed a higher benefit amount because of the extra expenses due to John's diet, they told me there was nothing they could do. When I asked if a doctor's note would help, my caseworker said, "not really." The extra money I spend on John's diet is significant and I'm managing a tight budget as it is. Sometimes at the end of the month there is no money and no food stamps left. It frustrates me that the extra money I must spend for John's condition is not taken into consideration, and I must struggle to provide my son with the food he needs to grow up healthy.

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### JULIE BUNTON BILLINGS, MONTANA

I live with my husband, Nate, and my two children, Aspen, two, and Rosie, 12. Nate also pays child support for his daughter, Sara, who lives with her mother. Nate works full time for a local contractor and earns \$8.25 an hour. I do childcare out of our home because I cannot make enough to cover the cost of childcare if I work outside the home. This leaves us with Nate's income of \$1,320 a month and the small income of about \$100 a month I make doing childcare that goes to support five people.

# *Julie*

Seven months ago, I realized that the state was calculating our food stamps incorrectly and overpaying us, so I notified them of their mistake. I was then told that I could either pay \$1,200 or give them 10 percent of my food stamps each month until it was paid off. I requested and was granted a fair hearing to dispute the claim that I owed \$1,200. The hearing occurred seven months ago and we still have not heard back on a final ruling. Since then my family has not received any food stamps even though I believe that we still qualify for some assistance. I am still receiving letters demanding that we set up payments for the overpayment even though there has been no decision from my fair hearing.

When we were on food stamps, we typically received between \$125 and \$208 each month, but this was never enough. Healthy dinners are not cheap and we could never afford balanced meals each month on food stamps alone. For example, at \$5 for a box of cereal, it would cost my family over \$60 a month to buy enough cereal for breakfast every day. But with only \$125 a month in food stamps and our strapped budget, we can't even buy cereal for one week without a struggle. However, things are a lot worse now without any food stamps and the debt on top of it.

Without food stamps we have been forced to stretch our limited budget to cover all of our food, rent, utilities and other basic necessities. We were planning for our first big Christmas with presents for the whole family, but we've had to put that on hold in case we have to find a way to squeeze \$1,200 more out of our budget. It doesn't make any sense that I was the one who found the problem and reported it, but now they are taking away food from our children to pay back the state. It was money that we needed and used for food for our family.

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## FOOD STAMP DEMANDS

*What constitutes **real** Food Stamp Reform? From our perspective, the most important focus for Food Stamp Reform is not decreased caseloads, but the elimination of hunger. To that end, we recommend policies that work to:*

**RESTORE AND EXPAND ELIGIBILITY.** One of the most important reasons for the post-1994 drop in Food Stamp participation are sweeping cuts in eligibility in the 1996 welfare reform law. These changes left gaping holes in the program, which our low-income families are falling through. Legal immigrants, able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), people with drug felony convictions, students, and people on strike all suffer from hunger, but are no longer protected by our nation's most basic safety net. The federal government needs to take a stronger role in preserving the nation's most fundamental defense against hunger, and reinforcing the message that our health and nutrition are prerequisites to self-sufficiency.

**REMOVE BARRIERS TO ACCESS.** The most significant factor in the sharp decline in Food Stamp participation in recent years is the overly complex nature of program rules and procedures we face. In a recently released report to Congress, USDA estimates that more than half (56%) of the sharp decline in food stamp participation since 1994 is due not to the booming economy or cutbacks in eligibility, but to the fact that fewer *eligible* households are enrolled in the program. Many of our families are discouraged by all of the red tape — extensive verification procedures, multiple office visits during business hours, and frequent mandatory reporting requirements. These complicated and arbitrary procedures are particularly burdensome for working families, who represent the fastest growing population of food stamp households.

**INCREASE BENEFIT LEVELS.** While food stamps provide us with much needed support, for many of us, current benefit levels are not high enough. In 2000, we averaged only 80 cents per meal; even the maximum allotment for a family of four provides only \$1.19 per person per meal. In a recently released study on hunger in seven Western states, 77 percent of food stamp recipients surveyed reported that their food stamps ran out after three weeks (Northwest Federation of Community Organizations, 2001). Food banks around the country are reporting serving growing numbers of food stamp recipients seeking food assistance when their food stamps have run out. Benefit levels must be increased to adequately reflect the real cost of food and other expenses, as well as the realities of daily life for low-income families.

**EVALUATE STATES ON CLOSING THE NEED GAP.** At the root of many of the barriers preventing eligible people from receiving food stamps is the Quality Control system the federal government uses to evaluate states' performance in administering the program. The current system is a punitive one that imposes financial sanctions on states with error rates (the percentage of benefits delivered incorrectly) higher than the national average. For caseworkers and low-income families, this translates into burdensome application and verification procedures, requiring a great deal of paperwork and frequent visits to the food stamp office.



The stories of families portrayed in this publication represent not only what we think is wrong with the Food Stamp Program, but also what we feel is needed to improve the program. The Food Stamp Program should aim to reduce hunger, not just to reduce caseloads. Benefits should be sufficient for our family to use all month and not run out after two weeks. If families speak other languages or we are of a different race or ethnicity, we should not have to fear discrimination when going to apply for benefits. Working families and those with transportation problems should be able to access food stamps without waiting for several weeks and going hungry. State Food Stamp Programs should be rewarded for good customer service and increased enrollment rates, not penalized for making minor mistakes.

Ultimately, the Food Stamp Program needs to become family-focused, with the goal of eliminating hunger in this country. There are many simple solutions the federal and state governments can adopt to improve the Food Stamp Program for hungry low-income families.

The federal government can improve the Food Stamp Program in four key ways. First, it can increase benefits so that families no longer go hungry when benefits run out. Second, eligibility levels should be increased to include more working poor families. Third, immigrant and unemployed populations should have their benefits restored. Finally, the federal quality control system needs to change from a system that penalizes states for minor errors to a system that rewards streamlined enrollment.



Aside from improvements at the federal level, states can make positive changes as well. States can improve and simplify their individual Food Stamp Programs, usually without additional state resources. The following is a list of state options available to states (some states have already implemented these options):

1. Adopt a simplified application procedure to ensure that all eligible families who apply for the program receive benefits.
2. Implement an outreach program to inform families about the availability of the Food Stamp Program.
3. Allow families to keep their food stamp benefits for one year rather than the current practice of three months.
4. Exempt all unemployed able-bodied adults without dependents from the federal 3-month time limit to receive food stamps. This is especially important as unemployment increases in the U.S.
5. Increase the standard utility deduction to a level that reflects the new higher cost of utilities.
6. Remove the vehicle and assets test so that more families can save for the future, own a reliable car, and still qualify for the program.
7. Institute an automatic 3-month transitional benefit for those leaving welfare to ensure they can make the transition without facing hunger.
8. Expand “categorical eligibility,” which will allow more families to qualify for the program.
9. Restore eligibility for legal immigrant families.

By adopting these federal and state solutions, families like Julie Bunton’s can someday save enough money to afford a Christmas for her family, and Bonnie Chambers and her husband will no longer have to skip meals to feed their kids.

FOOD STAMP PARTICIPATION AND  
AVERAGE MONTHLY BENEFITS PER PERSON

State/Territory		Participation Rate 1998	Average Monthly Benefits Per Person FY 2000
1	Hawaii	100%	\$117.37
2	West Virginia	92%	\$68.12
3	District of Col	89%	\$79.07
4	Maine	82%	\$66.77
5	Alaska	80%	\$101.78
6	Michigan	70%	\$63.11
7	Rhode Island	70%	\$66.51
8	Kentucky	69%	\$69.55
9	Louisiana	69%	\$74.70
10	Pennsylvania	69%	\$70.31
11	Tennessee	69%	\$69.73
12	Vermont	68%	\$65.30
13	Illinois	66%	\$83.07
14	Maryland	66%	\$75.83
15	Missouri	66%	\$70.48
16	New Mexico	66%	\$68.67
17	Nebraska	65%	\$61.56
18	Arkansas	64%	\$69.70
19	South Carolina	64%	\$70.33
20	Washington	64%	\$68.20
21	Alabama	63%	\$72.32
22	Oregon	63%	\$70.30
23	Indiana	61%	\$74.40
24	Oklahoma	61%	\$68.66
25	Connecticut	60%	\$69.67
26	New York	60%	\$78.86

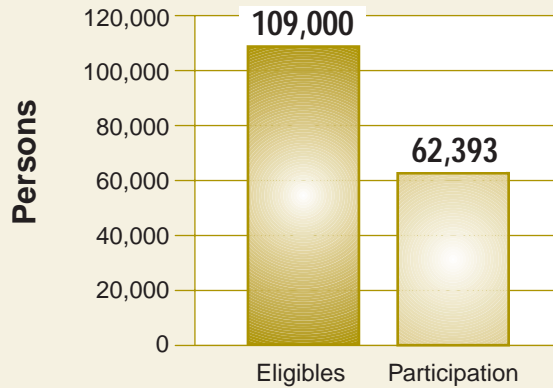
27	Utah	60%	\$69.44
28	Montana	59%	\$71.74
29	Virginia	59%	\$65.17
30	New Jersey	58%	\$73.45
31	Ohio	58%	\$71.10
32	Georgia	57%	\$72.82
33	Iowa	57%	\$67.69
34	Mississippi	57%	\$68.30
35	South Dakota	57%	\$71.47
36	Delaware	56%	\$80.51
37	Minnesota	56%	\$70.00
38	California	54%	\$74.58
39	Florida	54%	\$72.99
40	North Dakota	54%	\$66.23
41	Wyoming	54%	\$69.01
42	Kansas	53%	\$59.15
43	Colorado	52%	\$67.64
44	Texas	51%	\$75.97
45	North Carolina	50%	\$68.80
46	Idaho	49%	\$66.10
47	Massachusetts	49%	\$65.24
48	Wisconsin	49%	\$55.61
49	Arizona	47%	\$77.29
50	Nevada	46%	\$77.50
51	New Hampshire	45%	\$64.63

**Source:** Allen Schirm, Reaching Those in Need: Food Stamp Participation in 1998, United States Department of Agriculture, July 2000.  
<http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/PDFs/fnsbrochure.pdf>

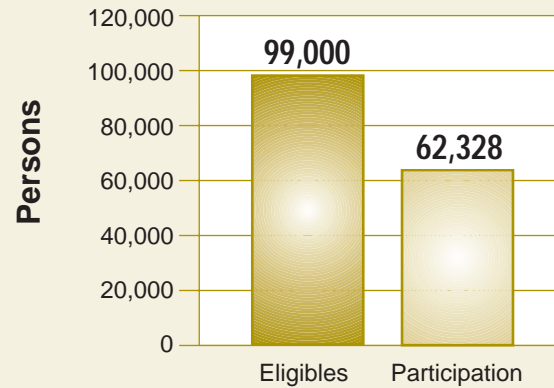
Average Monthly Benefit Per Person from United States Department of Agriculture.  
 “Food Stamp Program: Average Monthly Benefit Per Person,” Located at  
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/fsavgben.htm>.

# APPENDIX

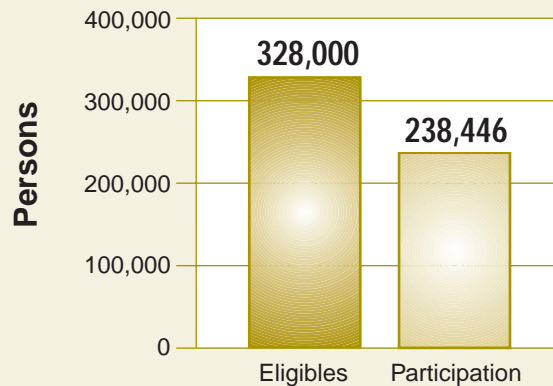
**Idaho food stamp eligibility and participation, 1998**



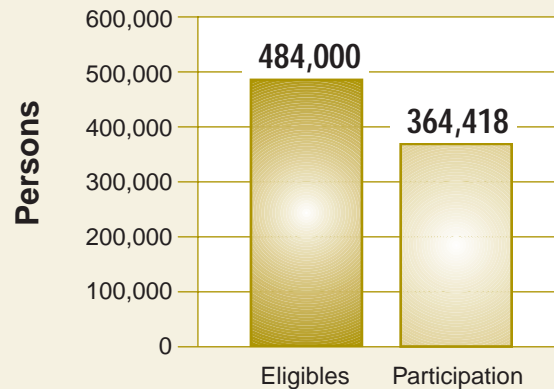
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**Oregon food stamp eligibility and participation, 1998**



**Washington food stamp eligibility and participation, 1998**



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