



Cuts Could Leave Poorest Residents in Silicon Valley Searching for Food

Posted by Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil on Thursday, October 17, 2013 Comments (0)



Volunteers from the Pacific Asian Advisory Council volunteer at a Second Harvest Food Bank center in San Jose. With cuts to the CalFresh food stamp program, a greater burden will be placed on Second Harvest, which provides meals for more than 250,000 people per month. (Photo courtesy of PAAC)

The [government shutdown](#) may be over, but the Republican-fueled hits keep on coming—especially for Silicon Valley's most vulnerable citizens.

Starting Nov. 1, extra funding provided by the American Recovery Act, President Obama's 2009 economic stimulus package, expire. As a result, people who rely on food stamps, officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or CalFresh in California, will see their benefits decrease. In addition, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a bill last month that would cut \$40 billion from the program over the next decade—

resulting in 3.8 million people getting kicked off the program next year, the Congressional Budget Office estimates.

In California, 4.1 million people use CalFresh to make ends meet. About 80 percent of them are people in families with children, and about 40 percent are in working families, says Kerry Birnbach, nutrition policy advocate for California Food Policy Advocates. Under the House bill, she estimates that 350,000 adults across the state would become ineligible for CalFresh, and that several hundred additional households would see their monthly benefits decrease.

One way the Republican bill, which was written under the direction of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, would do this is by imposing work requirements, so that adults without children must spend at least 20 hours per week on the job or in training. Without employment, a person can only receive benefits for three months every three years.

These work requirements were first added to the food stamp program in 1996 with Bill Clinton's welfare reform legislation. But after the economic recession hit, the federal government gave states the option to forgo this rule as a way of helping the soaring number of unemployed. The House bill would take away the ability of states—including California—to continue implementing this waiver, something Birnbach says is "particularly unfair given that unemployment is so high."

Cindy McCown, vice president of programs and services for the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties, agrees. "If you can't find a job, does that mean you can't eat?" McCown says. "We're dealing with a basic need—food—and I think there are probably other places that [Congress] needs to look at to make cuts."

While House Republicans have touted the legislation as a necessary move to reduce federal spending, Caroline Danielson, a research fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California, says it's mostly for show. "This is symbolic, I think, on the part of the Republicans," she says. "A 10-percent cut to the program is significant, but is not a lot in terms of federal spending or the federal deficit." The food stamp program costs about \$80 billion annually, about two percent of the federal government's \$3.5 trillion in spending.

The House bill would also slash costs by restricting categorical eligibility policies—which allow people to apply for food stamps before they've depleted all their financial resources—and by reversing efforts to streamline enrollment in the program. "What it comes down to is that households would lose benefits," says Birnbach.

She points out that there are other reasons to oppose the cuts as well. Although food stamp enrollment spiked during the recession, the program's increased spending will not be permanent. "It expands to meet demand, and it contracts if there's less demand," Birnbach says. "As the economy recovers, as people get jobs, we're going to see SNAP participation fall. There's an argument that there's no sense cutting it now, since it's going to cut itself." The Congressional Budget Office estimates that food stamp spending will return to its 40-year average by 2018.

In addition, reductions to food stamps could have a wider impact on the economy. "Every dollar spent using CalFresh benefits generates about \$1.74 in local economic activity," Birnbach explains. "So that'll hurt grocers, growers, food retailers and the people who work at those places, because that's less money going into the economy, supporting their work."

McCown says reductions to the food stamp program will put more pressure on the nonprofit sector—even though it's not equipped to meet this demand. Since the recession, Second Harvest Food Bank has already seen "record highs" in the number of people looking for assistance, so that now, it provides meals for more than 250,000 people per month, or one in 10 people living in the counties it services.

"SNAP is a really critical program for us to retain, because there's no way the food bank or any other charity would be able to make up that difference," she says.

A longer version of this article can be found on metroactive.com.