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Food Stamps, Food Security and Public Health:

Lessons from Minnesota

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The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems.

Introduction

Beginning in the late 1930s, the United States government began to recognize hunger and malnutrition as a condition that affects people at all income levels, inside and outside of their homes. Today's government continues to recognize and act upon the need for food and nutrition support systems. Federal food assistance and nutrition programs currently include the Food Stamp Program, WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), the National School Lunch Program, the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program and others. Through these programs, communities receive food and nutrition support for children in schools, senior citizens, women and infants, and those with insufficient income to afford the rising costs of food.

These programs are very much needed. The Minnesota Partners to End Hunger report that food shelf use in Minnesota increased 60 percent between 2000 and 2007.¹ One half of the food shelf clientele are children, and more than half of the families are working families unable to make ends meet. Food shelf use is reportedly growing most rapidly in suburban areas. Those seeking assistance at food shelves include families with college educations and good jobs and people who live in counties that rank among the most affluent in the country.² As seen in communities all over Minnesota, hunger is not limited to class, race or gender. It is circumstantial and can affect whole communities at once.

At the same time, the U.S. is experiencing a dramatic increase in obesity, especially in children. One third of U.S. adults are considered obese,³ and the number of children considered obese has tripled since the 1970s.⁴ The Centers for Disease Control report that from 1991 to 2003, the percent of Minnesotans qualifying as obese doubled – from a rate of 10-14 percent in 1991 to 20-24 percent in 2003.⁵

While the co-existence of hunger and obesity may seem contradictory, it is not. Both are the result of malnutrition and both represent a lack of food security. As defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "food security exists when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."⁶

The rising number of people struggling with an adequate and nutritious food supply is startling. Government officials, community leaders, philanthropists and others should be applauded for securing more resources for emergency food networks, food stamps, and other nutrition assistance programs. Administrators of these programs should be lauded for reaching the lives of millions of people, with ever-improving systems reaching those in need.

Yet, at the same time, the need for these programs should not be increasing. In basic terms, this means that there are more people in this country who seek help to put adequate food on their table. Poor dietary habits persist, and households remain in states of emergency with regards to food, thus continuing the need for supplemental programs and maintaining a cycle of dependence. While funding increases – such as through the 2008 Farm Bill – are desperately needed, in many cases the need for increased funding is increased demand. Simply increasing funding will not make the demand go away, or necessarily allow participants in these programs to become self-sufficient.

Food security affects people on a deep level, and the solutions are not to be found by funding increases alone. Food security is linked to income, the built environment, education, employment, housing, health care and many other issues that people face daily. For example, increases in food shelf activity are connected to many recent social stressors, including mass layoffs from local companies,⁷ rising food prices, and a stall in economic development.⁸ Increases in food donations are needed, but, to truly increase food security, so too are efforts that address the underlying drivers of why people are seeking this food assistance in the first place.

The need for food assistance and nutrition programs should not be increasing if the root societal problems were being addressed. Those who are able must step back and examine hunger and malnutrition from a broader perspective, asking why so many people continue to lack adequate food supplies and proper nutrition, and, more importantly, looking for ways to address these challenges and increase access to quality, nutritious foods for all.

The Food Stamp Program

The Food Stamp Program is a good case study to examine why, despite food assistance and nutrition programs, people continue to struggle with adequate and nutritious food supplies. The Food Stamp Program was established to provide supplemental resources to assist households with supplies of core dietary necessities. In 2006, an average of 26.7 million individuals per month used food stamps throughout the United States.⁹

Barriers to Participation

According to the Food Research and Action Center, 263,986 Minnesotans participated in the Food Stamp Program in 2005.¹⁰ The Minnesota Budget Project estimates that one in 20 Minnesotans is helped by food stamps.¹¹ As high as these numbers are, however, they represent only a portion of those who are eligible for the Food Stamp Program. In 2006, only 59 percent of Minnesotans eligible for food stamps participated in the program – putting Minnesota in the bottom third for state participation rates.¹²

In addition to Food Stamp benefits not reaching people who need them, underutilization of the program also results in less money entering the Minnesota economy. Food Stamp funding is allotted to states each year and the more people who are eligible and participating in the program, the more funding a state receives. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Food Stamp Program contributes approximately \$520 million to the Minnesota economy each year.¹³ The Legal Services Advocacy Project estimates, however, that Minnesota forgoes an additional \$172 million dollars per year in Food Stamp benefits that should be coming back into the local economy.¹⁴ In their estimation, in the six years between 2001 and 2007 Minnesota lost a total of \$838 million in forgone benefits – money that could be benefiting local communities, businesses and farmers.

Underutilization of the Food Stamp Program is likely one reason why Minnesotans continue to suffer from insufficient and unhealthy food supplies. A 59 percent participation rate means that 41 percent of those eligible for the program are not receiving the benefits they need. Addressing barriers to participation in the program will help ensure that Food Stamp benefits reach the people who need them.

Misconceptions and stigmatization

Myths have surrounded the Food Stamp and other nutrition assistance programs since their inception. As with many public support programs, the Food Stamp program is perceived to be a welfare-type program and therefore to be avoided.¹⁵ People who are not on the program refer to it as unnecessarily subsidizing food with tax dollars, and negatively stigmatize those who use the program as poor people. This stigma keeps some people from participating in the program.

The stigma surrounding food stamps often continues once people have entered the program. People who receive benefits report being embarrassed, especially from negative treatment at county offices and grocery stores.¹⁶ The recent development of the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card has provided more anonymity during use than the previous system of paper coupons, but many factors still combine to create an uninviting environment for those in need to be willing or able to accept the support available.

Application process, reporting requirements and negative interactions with administrators

The paperwork required to participate in the Food Stamp Program is another barrier to participation. The application process is intensive, detailed and time consuming.¹⁷ Once in the program, Minnesota participants must report monthly on income and expenses, a situation that for some is not worth the trouble. (Minnesota is one of only two states that require such frequent communications.¹⁸) Although the average monthly benefit in Minnesota was \$89.15 in 2005, the minimum monthly benefit is a mere \$10.00.¹⁹ The unknown amount of return for the extensive effort turns many away. In addition, Food Stamp organizers report that many eligible people refuse to participate in order to avoid dealing with county employees, who do not receive customer service training.²⁰

Challenges within the Food Stamp Program

Those who do enroll in the Food Stamp Program face challenges in using their benefits to acquire healthy foods.

Funding and benefit levels

While food stamps are meant to supplement, not replace, people's spending on food, the program is often insufficient to do even that. Food Stamp benefit levels are based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "Thrifty Food Plan," a low-cost model diet that many advocates do not think is sufficient to provide proper nutrition.²¹ The minimum monthly Food Stamp benefit – \$10.00 per month – has not changed since 1977.²² Many people run out of benefits before the end of the month, and with rising costs of living, many people in the program find themselves using food shelves to supplement their monthly situation.²³

Outreach and education

Outreach and education about nutrition, cooking, and smart food choices are important for ensuring that participants receive adequate nutrition when using their Food Stamp benefits and for giving them the tools to eat healthy once they've achieved self-sufficiency. However, the ability to reach out to the many different cultures, ages, and locations to help individuals is limited by lack of resources. Minnesota has only one full-time Food Stamp outreach coordinator working with the Department of Health.²⁴ The University of Minnesota Extension Service does have nutrition education organizers who work directly with Food Stamp participants through a program called "Simply Good Eating" but the need for education continues to exceed the resources available.²⁵

Efficiency and availability

Over the past ten years, the Food and Nutrition Service has been upgrading and modifying the Food Stamp Program for efficiency and adequate coverage. The most effective change has been upgrading from paper coupons to Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards that are used like debit cards in stores. Although this has given more anonymity to participants, there have been other effects to the accessibility of the program. As before the change to EBT, retailers must be certified to accept food stamps by their state government, but they now face added expenses in purchasing and maintaining an EBT point-of-sale machine, and in training employees to correctly monitor food stamp use. This change has particularly affected the farmers' market community, which usually does not have credit card or debit machines on site. As of 2007, only one farmers' market in Minnesota accepted food stamps, by way of a token system of transactions.²⁶ Only a handful of states have successfully implemented state-wide programs for farmers' market redemption, but individual markets throughout the country have found ways to incorporate EBT.²⁷

Systemic Issues

Removing the stigma associated with public assistance programs, improving application and reporting processes and strengthening outreach programs will all help improve the Food Stamp and other food assistance programs. However, there are other household realities and bigger systemic issues that must also be addressed.

Accessibility

Different communities and populations have very different access to food. Increasingly in both urban and rural areas, access to reliable transportation goes hand-in-hand with access to healthy foods. There may be fast food restaurants, convenience stores and gas stations in these areas but there are often few or no fruits, vegetables, or other healthy alternatives readily available for consumption. Such areas are often referred to as "food deserts."²⁸ If fruits and vegetables are available they are often expensive and of low quality, since outlets such as convenience stores often lack the infrastructure, experience and volume to support high quality, affordable fresh produce.²⁹ Getting to a grocery store with reasonable prices often requires a drive or a bus ride and shopping for more than one person without a car is a difficult task. While people may want to use their Food Stamp benefits to purchase fruits and vegetables, doing so may not be a realistic option.

Affordability

The types of food available to those seeking emergency support must also be recognized. In addition to the access issues described above, the cost of different foods can put healthier choices out of reach for many. Researchers have found that on a per-calorie basis, high-energy, low-nutrition “junk” foods tend to be less expensive than more nutritious foods such as fruits and vegetables.³⁰ The cost of these foods has also increased more slowly over time. Within the United States, between 1985 and 2000 the real (inflation-adjusted) cost of fresh fruits and vegetables rose nearly 40 percent, while real cost of soft drinks, sweets, fats and oils decreased.³¹ Particularly for those with limited food budgets, economically smart food choices and healthy food choices may conflict.

Other cost issues come into play as well. Many of the federal food assistance and nutrition programs distribute surplus food, which may not be the healthiest.³² Program budget constraints can necessitate the purchase and distribution of cheaper foods. While farmers’ markets and small local businesses are allowed to take food stamps, it is often not economically feasible for them to purchase and maintain the equipment required to do so.

Policy barriers

Factors such as the cost of food and locations of food deserts are linked to larger issues, particularly in terms of policy. Everything from agriculture policies to zoning codes to school lunch contracts can influence the availability, accessibility and cost of food. Making systemic and long-term changes to our food system will require addressing these and other policy barriers.

Recommendations

An adequate and appropriate food supply for every person, household, and family is a public health issue. It should be addressed and acted upon locally, supported by federal programs. In the short-term it is critical to ensure that all food assistance and nutrition programs have adequate funding to deliver the benefits people need. In the longer-term, however, the move toward food security must involve local agriculture, local economies, public policies, and an investment to improve the quality of life when working with community development. Without these, an increase in federal funding for food assistance and nutrition programs will be only a band-aid and will fail to solve hunger, malnutrition and related health problems in the long run. The following are recommendations for ensuring that food assistance and nutrition programs both deliver immediate benefits and help achieve long-term food security.

Address the larger drivers of food security

Programs such as the Food Stamp Program are meant to supplement food budgets and dietary intakes. Yet, without the tools to be self-sufficient, people will remain dependent on these programs. While food assistance and nutrition programs are critical in times of need, long-term self-sufficiency and food security can only be achieved by addressing the bigger drivers that lead people to seek food assistance in the first place. Issues such as employment, housing, health care, the built environment and education must all enter into discussions about and efforts to increase food security.

Make local foods part of food assistance programs

It is sadly ironic that 21 percent of U.S. Food Stamp Program participants live in rural communities – despite these communities housing only 16 percent of the U.S. population.³³ Ensuring that at least some of the foods purchased with and supplied through food assistance and nutrition programs are locally grown will not only increase the availability of fresh, healthy foods for participants in food assistance programs but also help bolster rural communities and create markets to support increased production of local foods.

Ensure nutrition education considers food access

Providing an educational component to food and nutrition assistance programs gives individuals more independence and choices for nutrition planning, as well as tools to use when benefits are no longer available to them. It could also help improve the image of food assistance programs, shifting the focus away from “welfare” and towards public health and nutrition. Some advocates believe that at least some level of nutrition education should be mandatory for participants, and that federal funding should support such activity.

Any education about what to eat, however, must go hand-in-hand with consideration of access, affordability and other factors that affect individuals’ ability to make healthy choices. For example, the fact that Food Stamp benefits can be used to purchase nearly any food item except alcohol, tobacco and dietary supplements – including candy bars and soda pop – has inspired some people to encourage stricter regulations on food stamp spending. This idea has floundered in part because of budgetary restraints and regulatory hurdles, and in part because many social advocates oppose policies that further restrict consumers’ choice.³⁴ But perhaps more importantly, such a policy ignores the economic reality that healthier food is often more expensive and people trying to stretch their food dollars may simply be making wise economic choices. Any nutrition education must include efforts to ensure that individuals have a realistic ability to make healthy choices.

Address barriers to participation in food assistance programs

Advocates have recently been developing simpler applications and more accessible processes to receive Food Stamp benefits. For example, in Minnesota, a coalition called Partners to End Hunger hopes to engage people in education about the Food Stamp program, debunking myths and increasing the number of participants.³⁵ This coalition is making progress in designing a more accessible federal program. However, Minnesota county employees who deal directly with Food Stamp applicants still are not receiving customer service training.³⁶ This training should be provided and mandatory for the administrators of the program. Having inviting, open doors will change the way the process is perceived, and allow more of the federal benefits to enter the Minnesota economy.

Changing the words we use could also help move us towards a healthier public awareness of food assistance programs. Community leaders, politicians, philanthropists, media campaigns, and lobbyists should strategically use more collective terms when discussing food programs and food support, such as “public health and nutrition,” “adequate food access” and “food security.” The terms “welfare,” “hunger,” and even “food stamps” carry the burden of a stigma built over decades.

Support healthy food initiatives

Food access and nutrition affect everyone, and all economic classes are susceptible to needing support at one time or another. All people should be aware of their access to food and be able to help determine the best options for the collective whole. While it may be easier to allow developers to determine where our food is available and large distributors to decide what food is on our shelves, decisions about food should be made with consideration of public health and community needs. Initiatives to expand access to healthy food have proliferated throughout the country, including, among others, farmers’ markets in low-income neighborhoods, farm-to-cafeteria programs, urban and youth gardening programs, healthy corner store initiatives, Community Supported Agriculture farms and food policy councils.

Many communities have conducted community food assessments, a process through which local organizations and individuals determine and understand the flow and availability of food in their community and set goals for improvement. In Minnesota, the Human Services and Public Health Department of Hennepin County has shown interest in running such a project, yet only a first exploratory step has been taken due to lack of county funding. The Northside Food Project has done food assessments in North Minneapolis, a neighborhood with one grocery store where food access has been a dramatic and much publicized issue.³⁷ Having strategic planning for a broad economic area, such as results from a community food assessment, provides greater understanding of a community’s food resources and needs and helps in setting clear goals for community residents and leaders.

Another way to increase access to healthy food is through expanded use of food stamps at farmers' markets. Farmers' markets should be institutionally supported with incentives to incorporate this function and conversely, Food Stamp participants should be encouraged and given incentives to shop at the markets. Since only one market in Minnesota has successfully adopted EBT procedures as of 2008, the system at the state level has not developed into a fully supported program. Nearly all of the marketing for the EBT system was done by the market itself. Expanding the use of food stamps at farmers' markets would make it easier for markets to increase their use and allow those on food stamps and other food assistance programs to expand their options for healthy eating.

Develop public policy to support food security

Progressive public policy is needed both to expand access to healthy food and to address the barriers to doing so. Policy at all levels – from individual corporate policies to local, state and national policy – can all help increase access to healthy foods.

The City of Minneapolis, for example, passed a 2008 policy establishing "Local Produce Markets," small farmers' markets that sell only locally grown produce and are easier and less expensive to organize than larger farmers' markets. The markets are authorized to accept WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program coupons and are also linked with food shelves to which farmers donate unsold produce at the end of the market. The streamlined process and decreased expense enables neighborhoods and organizations that may not be able to support a larger market to have a farmers' market. To date, all of the Local Produce Markets in Minneapolis are located in low-income neighborhoods, at places such as senior residences and community centers, where people lack access to healthy foods.³⁸

On the national level, there are also some exciting opportunities regarding federal policy related to food and nutrition. The WIC food package is currently expanding to include fruits and vegetables.³⁹ The Child Nutrition Act – which authorizes all of the child nutrition programs including the National School Lunch Program and WIC – is due for reauthorization in 2009. Ensuring these programs include not only healthy but also locally produced foods would do much to increase both access to and the supply of fresh, local foods. As this change takes place in 2009, states also need to be aware of the WIC nutrition program in relation to farmers' markets, as there may be an opportunity to use WIC food vouchers (as well as Farmers' Market Nutrition Program coupons) at farmers' markets. All states should be determining how to participate in this program so local foods grow increasingly accessible. Finally, although the most recent federal farm bill just passed in June 2008, it is never too early to begin working on the next one.

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