



Poor's nutritional needs not being met

By Trudi Renwick, June 7, 2007

Hunger. Food insecurity. These are abstract terms for most of us. But some of our neighbors pledged this month to opt for a taste of what it's like to have too little food in the cupboard to make it through the week. Religious leaders, advocates and public officials promised that, for at least one day this month, they would limit their daily food spending to \$3.50, the value of food stamp benefits now offered to low-income New Yorkers.

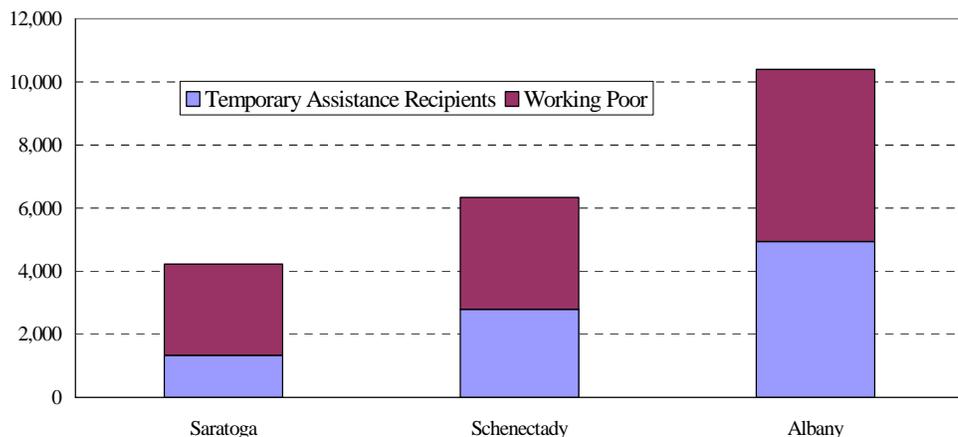
Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany took part. He described his commitment in moral and religious terms: "On behalf of those who must face this dilemma on a daily basis, I accept the challenge to live on \$1.16 per meal today in solidarity with their plight and in prayerful hope that together we can bring sufficient resources to those struggling to feed their families in this, the greatest nation in the world."

In terms of politics, Congress will soon decide the fate of the Food Stamp Program when they turn to debating the Farm Bill later this month. We need them to know that almost 1.8 million New Yorkers—26 million Americans overall—rely on food stamps to help them purchase a nutritionally adequate diet. In Albany, Saratoga and Schenectady Counties alone, more than 40,000 people relied on Food Stamps each month in 2006.

The Food Stamp Program is the nation's largest and most comprehensive nutrition program, and it's the single most important factor in this country's significant progress against hunger and malnutrition in recent decades. In the late 1960s, medical research exposed the fact that American children were suffering and dying from malnutrition-related diseases that usually occur only in third-world countries. By 1979, after the Food Stamp Program became available nationwide, physicians found that severe malnutrition had become rare. They attributed this dramatic improvement to food stamps.

Food stamps generally go to households that include children, elderly people, or people with disabilities. But many food stamp recipients are from working families. In fact, in Albany, Saratoga and Schenectady Counties, food stamp recipients from working families outnumber food stamp recipient from families on temporary assistance by two to one: 28,530 in working poor families compared

Food Stamps Provided Assistance to 20,000 Families in Albany, Saratoga and Schenectady Counties in 2006



to 12,856 in cash assistance families. And the number is growing. During the most recent economic expansion, the number of households in Albany, Saratoga and Schenectady Counties receiving food stamps has grown by more than 33 percent, from 15,768 in 2002 to 20,956 in 2006. Fully 71 percent of the new households were working poor families.

Unfortunately, food stamps are worth only about \$1.16 per person per meal for the average New Yorker. And because they don't keep up with the cost of living, the amount of food they can purchase is steadily declining. So households are increasingly likely to run out of food before the end of the month, affecting everything from their health to their ability to succeed at work and in school. Local food pantries try to make up the difference but find it hard to meet the needs.

Food stamp rules allow applicants to subtract a "standard deduction" from their income to reflect the cost of non-food necessities such as housing, clothes, transportation, and school supplies. The standard deduction represents the portion of household income that is not available to purchase food because it must be used for other basic expenses. Food stamp benefit levels are based on a household's income minus the standard deduction and other deductions; households with lower incomes, after deductions, receive larger food stamp benefits because they have less money available to purchase food.

Until 1996, the standard deduction went up each year to account for the fact that basic living expenses go up due to inflation. In 1996, however, Congress froze the standard deduction, a freeze that remains in effect today. It's time to fix this eleven-year-old problem.

Our representatives in Congress need to realize that next year, food stamp benefits for a typical working parent with two children in New York will be about \$24 a month lower than they would have been without the freeze. That \$24 could have gone for vegetables and fruit sorely lacking from low-income diets. In all, New York residents will lose \$115 million in food stamp benefits in FY2008 due to the freeze in the standard deduction. And if the rules are not changed, the cut will continue to grow, by the end of ten more years to a total of \$1.55 billion.

And strengthening the food stamp program isn't just the right thing to do. It would also provide a significant boost to State's economy by increasing overall food purchases. Despite the fact that food stamp benefits are low for each recipient, the program overall brings \$2.3 billion in federal dollars into New York. Last year, residents of Albany, Saratoga and Schenectady Counties had \$45 million more to spend on food thanks to the Food Stamp program. These funds don't just put food on the table. They also provide vital support for food distributors—including local grocery stores—and for food producers. Food stamp dollars translate into jobs; according to the USDA, every \$5 in food stamp benefits generates \$9.20 in local economic activity.

So when it renews the Food Stamp Program in the Farm Bill this summer, Congress should improve food stamp benefits with a goal of ensuring families get adequate help. And this means help with healthier foods, which tend to be more expensive. At the very least, Congress must stop the erosion in the value of food stamp benefits. Left unchecked, this erosion makes it harder every year to put food on the table. Stopping the erosion in benefits would help low-income New Yorkers and the entire New York economy.

Trudi Renwick, Ph.D., is senior economist at the Fiscal Policy Institute, a research organization that focuses on the economic wellbeing of New York State residents. FPI's recent report, *Stretched Too Thin: Food Stamp Benefits in New York State*, is available at www.fiscalpolicy.org.