

Take the Challenge:

Living on a Food Stamp Budget



Representative
Barbara Lee
(D-CA)



Representative
Jo Ann Emerson
(R-MO)



Representative
Jim McGovern
(D-MA), wife Lisa
McGovern, food
stamp recipient
Toinette Wilson

Take the Challenge: **Living on a Food Stamp Budget**

A T O O L K I T F O R M E M B E R S O F C O N G R E S S

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About the Challenge

Why Take the Challenge?

The Food Stamp Program makes a difference in the lives of millions of Americans across the country, but in many cases, the benefits received are too low to allow families to purchase nutritious food and to feed their families healthy meals on a consistent basis.

The “Food Stamp Challenge” seeks to highlight what it is like to eat on the average food stamp benefit – approximately \$1 per meal. Members of Congress, governors, state officials, journalists and other community leaders have taken the Challenge and have learned first hand what it is like to try to make ends meet on the average food stamp benefit.

While the average food stamp benefit is approximately \$3 per day, depending on income and situation, some households qualify for the maximum benefit, while others get as little as \$10 a month. After paying for housing, energy and health care expenses, many low-income households have little or no money remaining to spend on food without food stamp benefits. In addition, most food stamp households report that their food stamp benefits do not last the entire month and many are forced to turn to food pantries and soup kitchens.

While living on a food stamp budget for just a week cannot come close to the struggles encountered by low-income families week after week and month after month, it does provide those who take the Challenge with a new perspective and greater understanding.

The purpose of this Food Stamp Challenge Toolkit is to encourage more people to take the Challenge. The toolkit includes facts about the Food Stamp Program, a list of those who have participated and media coverage about the Challenge. Also included are template materials such as a media advisory and press release to spread the word about the Challenge.

For Members of Congress, a blog has been created – <http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com> – to allow Challenge participants to share their experiences on a daily basis. As of June 2007, the blog has received more than 50,000 hits and has been mentioned in articles in the *Washington Post*, among others.

As most of the Challenge participants have found, living on an average food stamp budget for even a week is a difficult undertaking, but for millions of Americans it is a daily reality. By improving their understanding of the circumstances many food stamp recipients face, policy-makers will be better equipped to make good decisions about improvements to the Food Stamp Program.

For more information or to take the Challenge, contact **Laura Hayes** at The Hatcher Group (301-656-0348; laura@thehatchergroup.com), **Ellen Vollinger** at the Food Research and Action Center (202-986-2200; evollinger@frac.org), or **Kate Mitchell** with Congressman Jim McGovern (202-225-6101; kate.mitchell@mail.house.gov).

The Food Stamp Program is the nation’s single most important program in the fight against hunger. The program is designed to improve the nutrition level and food purchasing power of people with low incomes.

What is the Food Stamp Challenge?

The Food Stamp Challenge gives participants a view of what life can be like for millions of low-income Americans.

Most participants take the Challenge for one week, living on about \$3 per day worth of food – the average food stamp benefit.

Challenge participants are forced to make difficult food shopping choices, and often realize how difficult it is to avoid hunger, afford nutritious foods, and stay healthy. The cost of a container of coffee and fresh fruits and vegetables will never be looked at the same way.

Challenge Testimonials

EXPERIENCES OF OFFICIALS ON THE CONGRESSIONAL FOOD STAMP CHALLENGE

U.S. Representative Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.)

“This is really a challenge. There are a lot of people in this country who go through this every day.”

New York City Councilman Eric Gioia

“You realize pretty quickly that you can't make healthy choices on this budget. It's virtually impossible to live a healthy lifestyle. We could end hunger in New York City and America by taking some simple steps, but what we have to do is build political will, show politicians of all stripes that this is something people care about, that this is a real issue and a solvable problem.”

Governor Ted Kulongoski (D-Oregon)

“Budgeting just \$1 a meal each day for food, and trying to make that food nutritious, is a difficult task that sadly is a reality for too many Oregonians and their families.”

U.S. Representative Barbara Lee (D-Ca.)

“We decided to participate in this challenge to help raise the level of awareness and really inform the public that food stamp recipients live on \$21 a week, \$3 a day. Hopefully through this campaign we will help those who are eligible for food stamps understand that they should apply and that there are some of us who are trying to increase the amount so they can get on their feet.”

U.S. Representative Jim McGovern (D-Mass.)

“We want to urge or shame Congress into doing the right thing. Thirty-six million people are what is called ‘food insecure.’ That's something we should all be ashamed of in the richest country in the world.”

U.S. Representative Tim Ryan (D-Ohio)

“It showed me that when you're living on food stamps, you're really one event away from disaster. If you drop a jar of sauce or jam, you can lose an opportunity to eat. Some people are constantly living on that edge.”

U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.)

“Living on food stamps is not just about the food. It takes a lot of planning ahead to live on a food stamp budget, and still, even if you get the calories you need, you can't get the nutrients. Maybe some nutrition expert can figure out how one can eat healthily on a food stamp diet, but I can't see how it's done. Fruits and vegetables, especially fresh ones, are very expensive relative to foods like pastas and bread.”

Governor Jon Huntsman, Jr. (Utah-R) and spouse, Mary Kaye Huntsman

“We have an empty, empty refrigerator,” said Mary Kaye Huntsman. “We learned a lot of great lessons this week.”

But, “we're glad it's over,” the governor added.

Challenge Participants

Below is a list with a sample of public officials, journalists, and community members who have participated in the Food Stamp Challenge since April.

For information about prior Challenges in 2006 and early 2007 in Philadelphia, PA, Wichita, KA, Hartford, CT, and Reno, NV, visit FRAC's Web site "Challenge" page at <http://www.frac.org>.

The current program benefits average \$1 per meal per person, just \$3 a day. Consider this in the context of typical spending. A gallon of milk costs close to \$5, a box of cereal is more than \$4 and one apple can cost .60 to \$1 each. These numbers add up quickly.

Public Officials

June 2007:

U.S. Senator **Blanche Lincoln**
U.S. Representative **Barbara Lee**
U.S. Delegate **Eleanor Holmes Norton**
Washington, D.C. Council Chairman **Vincent C. Gray**
San Francisco, CA Assemblyman **Mark Leno**
Oklahoma Lieutenant Governor **Jari Askins**
Norman, OK Mayor-Elect **Cindy Rosenthal**
Oklahoma City, OK State Senator **Andrew Rice**
Oklahoma City, OK State Representative **Anastasia Pittman**
Shawnee, OK State Representative **Kris Steele**
Oklahoma City, OK State Representative **Al McAffrey**
Tulsa, OK State Representative **Jabar Shumate**
Denver, CO Mayor **John Hickenlooper**
Lucia Guzman, Executive Director of the Denver Mayor's Office for Human Rights and Community Relations
Fort Collins, CO State Representative **John Kefalas**
Denver Human Services Manager **Roxane White**
North Carolina County Commissioner **Bill Caster**
Saginaw, MI State Representative **Andy Coulouris**
Randy R. Barst, Director of the Saginaw, MI County Department of Human Services

May 2007:

U.S. Representative **Jim McGovern** and spouse **Lisa McGovern**
U.S. Representative **Jo Ann Emerson**
U.S. Representative **Jan Schakowsky**
U.S. Representative **Tim Ryan**
New York City Councilman **Eric Gioia**
Utah Governor **Jon Huntsman, Jr.**
Salt Lake County, UT Mayor **Peter Corroon** and family

Rockville, UT Mayor **Dan McGuire** and family
Salt Lake City, UT State Representative **Jennifer Seelig**
Highland, UT State Representative **John Dougall**
J.P. Hughes, MD, Candidate for Mayor, Salt Lake City, UT
Sally Clark, Seattle City Council, WA

April 2007:

Oregon Governor **Ted Kulongoski**
Connecticut State Senator **Jonathan Harris**

Journalists

June 2007:

John Branston, *Memphis Flyer*, TN
Mary Cashiola, *Memphis Flyer*, TN

May 2007:

Martha Martinez, *The Bakersfield Californian*
Teri Finneman, *The Forum*, ND
Jill Wendholt Silva and family, *Kansas City Star*, KS
Julie Simon, CBS News, Austin, TX
Rebecca Walsh, *Salt Lake Tribune*, UT
Patt Morrison, *LA Times*, CA
Rebecca Blood, Blogger

Community

May 2007:

Ann-Marie Davis and **Brett Hillier**, Concerned Citizens, La Quinta, CA
Nancy Carrington, Executive Director, CT Food Bank
Josh and Pierrette Silverman of New Haven, CT
Rev. Dr. Shelly Stackhouse, Pastor, Church of the Redeemer, New Haven, CT
Margaret Ziegler, Deputy Director, Congressional Hunger Center, Washington, D.C.
Richard Leach, Senior Policy Advisor, Friends of the World Food Program, Washington, D.C.
Max Finberg, Director, Alliance to End Hunger, Washington, D.C.
Alex Ashbrook, D.C. Hunger Solutions, Washington, D.C.
Katrina Knight, Executive Director of Good Shepherd Center, NC
Debby Kaiser, NC
Trudi Renwick, Senior Economist, Fiscal Policy Institute, NY
Bishop Howard J. Hubbard, Albany, NY
Joel Berg, Director, New York City Coalition Against Hunger, NY
Sister Mary Scullion, Philadelphia, PA
Hyta Folsom, Executive Director, West Texas Food Bank, TX
Tara Rollins, Utah Housing Coalition, Salt Lake City, UT
Shawn Teigen, Utah Community Action Partnership, Association, Salt Lake City, UT
Kori Shaw, Utah Community Action Partnership Association, Salt Lake City, UT

Media Coverage

The Food Stamp Challenge has been covered by major national news outlets ranging from the *Washington Post* to the *Boston Globe* to CNN to *The New Yorker* to the *Colbert Report*. Following is a sampling of the coverage:

San Francisco Chronicle, The Food Stamp Diet

Denver Post, Living on \$3 a Day for Food

USA TODAY, Study puts price of hunger at \$90B

KSBI-TV Oklahoma, Food Stamp Challenge

Boston Globe, Lawmaker cuts budget to \$3 a day

Seattle Times, The 21 Club in Congress

ABC News, City Councilman Uses Food Stamps to Raise Awareness About Nutrition Among the Poor

Washington Post, Lawmakers Find \$21 a Week Doesn't Buy a Lot of Groceries

Associated Press, Emerson Tries Living on \$3 a Day Food Stamp Budget

Salem News, Governor Challenges Oregonians to Food Stamp Challenge

Food stamp recipients receive assistance in once monthly allotments. Food "stamps" are no longer used, having been replaced by an electronic benefit transfer system, known as EBT. EBT is a benefits card that operates similarly to a bank card.

San Francisco Chronicle

The Food Stamp Diet

Editorial

Friday, June 8, 2007

The hottest diet sweeping the nation has very little in common with Atkins or South Beach. Carbs, in fact, seem to be the only item on the menu: Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, is eating a box of crackers, a loaf of whole-wheat bread, tortillas and brown rice. Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, subsisted on cornmeal – until he cheated and had a pork chop. Eric Gioia, a city councilman in Queens, N.Y., found himself feeling “lousy” and “tired” after a few days of white bread, corn and ramen.

That’s how the 26 million Americans who depend on food stamps feel every day.

A long list of politicians, both local (Assemblyman Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, has been filling up on 19-cent bananas and peanut butter sandwiches) and national, have taken a weeklong “food stamp challenge.” By attempting to subsist on what they can buy with a week’s worth of food stamps – the average benefit is about \$3 a day – they hope to draw attention to this long-neglected, much-maligned program, which is up for reauthorization (and, hopefully, an \$4 billion increase in benefits) in this year’s Farm Bill.

Here’s what Americans can learn from their ordeal: On \$3 a day, it’s tough to buy the fresh fruits, vegetables and quality proteins that make up a healthy diet. If a recipient makes a single poor choice at the supermarket – breaks a single jar in the kitchen – she may go hungry for days. There shouldn’t be any doubt in our minds that increasing benefits for the food stamp program is a vital use of our resources.

Denver Post

Living on \$3 a Day for Food

Editorial

June 8, 2007

It’s been eye-opening, even amusing at times, to follow the trials and travails of usually well-fed public officials attempting to eat on a food-stamp budget.

They’re loading up on potatoes, beans and rice and passing up items like coffee, fresh vegetables and most meat. It’s tough to make ends meet on \$3 a day.

Colorado officials and others around the country have been taking part in the Food Stamp Challenge. Their efforts are drawing attention to the program as it goes before Congress for reauthorization in the 2007 Farm Bill. The measure before Congress would add \$4 billion to the \$33 billion food-stamp budget, an increase that would give a family of four an additional \$48 a month for food.

It’s hard to imagine that the public officials who have been eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or skipping meals could have a more compelling demonstration of why an increase is appropriate.

Mayor John Hickenlooper was reduced to a dinner of a baked potato topped with Velveeta cheese and a business lunch in which he had to rely on the free rolls and a dollop of peanut butter.

Around the country, members of Congress and others concerned about hunger in America have similar stories.

U.S. Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., who last month introduced the measure to increase spending on food stamps and other federal nutrition programs, took part in the challenge. On several mornings he relied on a single banana for breakfast and a cheese tortilla – consumed in four bites – for dinner.

It's been an interesting and challenging experiment for Hickenlooper, McGovern and others, but it's a grim reality for 26 million people who relied on food stamps in 2006, including 251,385 Coloradans.

McGovern's bill, co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Mo., would strengthen the emergency food assistance program, reauthorize the commodity supplemental food program, and provide easier access for food-stamp enrollment. Only 60 percent of eligible households nationwide are in the program.

The measures, which would cost \$20 billion over five years, would address the often overlooked problem of hunger in America. A recent U.S. Department of Agriculture study found that 35 million U.S. residents couldn't reliably put food on the table. That's an abominable statistic for a country of such wealth and education. We urge members of Congress to seriously consider the measure – even if they never have to try to subsist on ramen noodles.

USA TODAY
Study puts price of hunger at \$90B
By Emily Bazar
June 4, 2007

People who don't have enough to eat cost the American public at least \$90 billion a year in charitable donations, reduced productivity and health care costs, according to a study out today.

Those costs could be largely eliminated by boosting federal nutrition programs \$10 billion to \$12 billion a year, says lead author J. Larry Brown, a researcher at the Harvard School of Public Health. Programs such as food stamps are underfunded and don't reach enough people, he says.

The report was commissioned by the Sodexo Foundation, a charity focused on hunger.

"Hunger is a problem that can be solved if Congress decides to step up to the plate to end it," Brown says. "It costs many times more to maintain the problem than to actually end hunger."

In 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available, 35 million people lived in households that frequently went without enough to eat, Brown says.

The study separates the annual cost of hunger into three categories:

- **Charity.** About \$14.5 billion is spent on soup kitchens, food banks and other volunteer efforts.
- **Illness.** Physical and mental problems related to malnutrition, such as anemia and depression, cost about \$66.8 billion in medical care. "When people go hungry, particularly children and the elderly, they get sick more," Brown says.
- **Reduced productivity.** Malnutrition can hamper brain function, Brown says, lowering school and job performance at an estimated price tag of \$9.2 billion.

Democratic Rep. Jim McGovern of Massachusetts is co-chairman of the House Hunger Caucus. He plans to share copies with his colleagues and says he will call for hearings on its findings.

He has introduced a measure to provide \$20 billion over five years to expand federal nutrition programs.

The Food Stamp Program is targeted toward those most in need.

Food stamp households in FY 2005:

- More than half of food stamp recipients are children, and eight percent are over 60 years old;
- Three out of ten food stamp recipients had earnings;
- Over two-thirds of food stamp households had no countable resources;
- Approximately 40 percent of food stamp households have gross incomes at or below half of the poverty line. The 2007 HHS poverty line for an individual is approximately \$850 a month and \$10,200 a year.

“I don’t think a lot of people in the country think hunger is a cost to them, but it is,” he says.

Michael Tanner, director of health and welfare studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, says spending more won’t solve the problem. Trillions of dollars have been spent since President Johnson declared war on poverty more than 40 years ago, and poverty rates are largely unchanged, he says.

Hunger should be addressed through its underlying causes, he says, pointing to inadequate public education, out-of-wedlock births and unemployment. “There are all sorts of mental and physical and spiritual problems that can’t be dealt with by writing a check,” he says.

KSBI-TV Oklahoma

Food Stamp Challenge

Monday, June 4, 2007

It sounds practically impossible to do for many Americans, eat for one week on only \$21. However, for those on food stamps it’s a reality.

Norman Council member and Mayor-Elect Cindy Rosenthal says, “We know that hunger is an issue in our community and my participation is aimed at trying to build more awareness.”

It’s called the Food Stamp Project.

Rosenthal says she decided to give it a try to understand what some people in her community go through everyday.

Rosenthal says, “It’s already quite challenging because some of the things we take for granted are no longer within the budget.”

It’s an issue that affects more than 400,000 Oklahomans. Those on food stamps learn to eat on about one dollar a day per family member.

Rosenthal says, “No Starbucks, no impulse buying and even in planning for the menus it was challenging to think about staying in that budget and not going over.”

That budget, \$21 per family member.

Rosenthal is not alone. The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma is encouraging everyone willing to give it a try for just one week. Rosenthal says awareness is one of the biggest changes she’s seen.

She says, “I’m very aware as I go into this of how much I’m able to spend on food and I think that awareness is the biggest change.”

Rodney Bivens, with the Regional Food Bank, says, “We’ve had that same experience from several other individuals who have taken the challenge.”

Even though she will only live this way for one week, Rosenthal says it’s good to know what other live through. She started the challenge Sunday, and says the support she’s received is encouraging.

She says, “A number of people have written me and sent e-mails and even if they are not actually taking the challenge this has prompted them to think about the issues, and that’s the goal.”

Tuesday is National Hunger Awareness Day. For more information check out www.hungerinoklahoma.org

Boston Globe

Lawmaker cuts budget to \$3 a day Rep. McGovern tries eating on average food stamp benefit

May 21, 2007

WASHINGTON – US Representative James P. McGovern pushed his grocery cart along the aisle at Safeway in southeast D.C., pausing for an agonizing moment in front of the coffee. Safeway brand, the cheapest, is three bucks a can. “This gets my juices running in the morning,” he said. Into the cart it went.

And out of the cart it came. He decided he could not afford it. Instead he headed for dairy, where he selected a large package of shredded cheese, on special for \$3.50. It would help stretch his meals for the week.

Normally when he shops at Safeway, McGovern, 47 and a Worcester Democrat, throws things into the cart regardless of price. He is not a food stamp recipient who shops deliberately, mindful of every nickel. Except for this week.

From breakfast last Tuesday morning (a banana and tap water) to dinner Monday night (whatever he has left), the Democrat from Worcester is eating on a total of \$21, or \$1 per meal. Nationally, the average monthly food stamp benefit in fiscal 2005 was \$94.05, or about \$3 a day, according to the US Department of Agriculture. (It ranged geographically from \$76.39 in Wisconsin to \$163.85 in the US territory of Guam.)

McGovern’s point is that the allocation is inadequate and forces the poor to make impossible choices among food, rent, heat, gasoline, and healthcare. He and Jo Ann Emerson, a Missouri Republican, cochair the House Hunger Caucus and are trying to raise awareness among their brethren and the public as the Farm Bill comes up for reauthorization this summer. The food stamp program is included in the bill, and the duo has asked that \$4 billion be added to the current \$33 billion budget that covered 26 million recipients last year, 430,000 of them in Massachusetts. Under the bill, a family of four would get an additional \$48 a month.

“We want to urge or shame Congress into doing the right thing,” McGovern said as he entered the Safeway market. “Thirty-six million people are what is called ‘food insecure.’ That’s something we should all be ashamed of in the richest country in the world.”

McGovern is a big guy: 6 feet, 188 pounds. He has a healthy appetite. He loves red wine and desserts. Every day he gets a candy bar from the vending machine. “I love food,” he said. “Everything.”

At Safeway, he was joined by his wife Lisa, who is also taking the challenge. Together they had \$42 to spend. (Their two young children will not be on the food stamp diet.)

They were accompanied by expert shopper Toinette Wilson, a single mother of three on food stamps who is earning a cosmetology license. Wilson offered tips: Buy bags of pasta, rice, and frozen vegetables.

The McGoverns bypassed chicken breasts and got a cut-up chicken for \$7.32. They skipped the lean ground beef they usually buy for a cheaper, fattier cut.

Should they get the bag of brown rice for \$2.79 or the white for \$2.19? They splurged on the brown. Should they buy butter? No, they could not afford it.

Then there’s the coffee question. He wanted it but felt guilty. She encouraged him: “If you’re going to be miserable all week...”

To be eligible for food stamps, households, except those with elderly or disabled members, must have gross incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line. All households must have net incomes below 100 percent of poverty to be eligible. Time limits for receiving food stamps also apply for many able-bodied, childless, unemployed adults.

In the end, it was McGovern staff member Michael Mershon who saved the day by putting a small packet in the cart for \$1.55.

Lisa headed for the checkout line while her husband dashed off with another cart for their last supper that night before their lean cuisine begins the next morning. He bought steaks, asparagus, tomatoes, and a bottle of pinot noir.

At the register, the total for the week comes to \$41.70 – 30 cents under their food stamp allotment.

The total for that night's dinner for them and their two children: \$44.

At home in southeast Washington, he broiled the steaks, sauteed the asparagus, and sliced the tomatoes.

The next morning, McGovern rose at 5 a.m. – it's usually 6:20 – to soak and boil lentils. He also made bacon and eggs for Patrick, 9, and Molly, 5, and packed a banana for breakfast and a bowl of lentils for lunch.

That night he was off to speak at a National Immigration Forum dinner at the posh Mayflower hotel. "No, thank you," he said, as waiters offered trays of endive with goat cheese and asparagus wrapped in phyllo. At the open bar, he asked for tap water.

Dinner was difficult: The tables bore baskets of rolls and trays of petite pastries. He waved off a waiter and glumly unwrapped a cheese tortilla Lisa brought him: It was gone in four gulps.

Wednesday: McGovern attended a breakfast fund-raiser in his honor at Bistro Bis in the Hotel George. While others ate eggs, bacon, potatoes, and sweet rolls, and drink freshly squeezed orange juice and "great-smelling coffee," he had a banana and water. At lunch he traded his lentils for Jo Ann Emerson's chicken salad, a good deal for him. At dinner he attended a Hillary Clinton fund-raiser at the Georgetown home of Elizabeth and Smith Bagley. The guests, except for McGovern, nibbled on duck and spring rolls, and then dined on soup, ravioli, crab cakes, chicken, and various breads and desserts. He ate nothing until, back at his office, the chicken and rice he brought from home that morning. ("The chicken was OK. The rice was gross – soggy and cold.")

Walking home from his office at 9:30, he ran into several colleagues sitting out at sidewalk cafes. Would he join them, several asked. He wanted to, but declined. One friend jokingly inquired whether he would be sleeping on a grate that night.

Thursday: It was a banana again for breakfast. He and Lisa talked about how in the scheme of life, this week's menu was just a minor inconvenience. "We know that on Tuesday we can go crazy and eat whatever we want," he said. "Doing this week after week after week must be just awful."

He prepared his lunch: lentils and "a tiny chicken wing." In the evening, he attended an Oxfam America reception, skipping the hors d'oeuvres, and gave a speech about world hunger. Later, Lisa and the children brought dinner to his office: spaghetti made with the hamburger and a jar of tomato sauce.

Yesterday: McGovern wolfed the last banana for breakfast, chasing it with water. He was hoarding his packet of coffee for the weekend, which he expected to be particularly hard: more free time, little food left.

Lunch was leftover pasta; dinner was scrambled eggs with potato and cheese. He had lost three pounds in four days.

But he felt his forced diet had done some good. "Our point in doing this was to get attention, to get people talking, and to raise awareness," he said. "It was also for us to learn. That's happening."

Tuesday, when they're back to their old lives, Lisa will reach first for a Diet Coke. He's thinking of a "nice, grilled New York strip." And all the coffee he wants.

Seattle Times

The 21 Club in Congress

Editorial

May 21, 2007

Lawmakers in Congress scrimping on \$21 worth of groceries a week can find better ways to learn about the inadequacies of the federal food-stamp program.

The Food Stamp Challenge taken by four House members comes off as a stunt. A better choice for the four – Democrats Tim Ryan of Ohio, Janice Schakowsky of Illinois and Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, and Republican Jo Ann Emerson of Missouri – is to tour food banks and drum up votes for a \$4 billion increase in the annual food-stamp budget.

The bill, introduced by McGovern and Emerson, would be part of the 2007 Farm Bill. But it isn't a sure thing. The gargantuan farm bill is a bloated edifice stuffed with more pork than a barbecue joint. It remains to be seen whether lawmakers are willing to make fiscal trade-offs to pay for an increase, not just in food stamp benefits, but in spending for the networks that distribute food to 500,000 low-income seniors nationwide.

The formula for computing food-stamp benefits hasn't been adjusted for inflation in more than a decade. As a result, 26 million low-income and elderly Americans rely on food stamps with an average allowance of \$3 a day.

The four in Congress are attempting to live like that for a week. But it doesn't take seven days of ramen noodles to grasp the inadequacy of food-stamp benefits.

Rather than highlight a very serious issue, the congressional food pact trivializes it.

Rep. Ryan mourns the eggs he cannot eat because they are unaffordable at \$1.29 for a half-dozen. Organic products and fresh vegetables are as out of reach for the four as caviar is for most of us. The worse deprivation: ignoring food at the endless stream of lobbyist lunches, receptions and political fundraisers.

The congressional lawmakers should eat heartily. They'll need the strength – and no small measure of courage – to take a knife to the farm bill and carve out room for boosting the food-stamp program.

ABC News

'I'm Hungry All the Time'

City Councilman Uses Food Stamps to Raise Awareness About Nutrition Among the Poor

By Rebecca Lee

May 17, 2007

New York City Councilman Eric Gioia is being written about in virtually every New York City newspaper this week.

The Queens Democrat is the subject of so much attention not because he's announced he's running for president or because he is pushing through a piece of groundbreaking legislation, but rather for putting his money where his mouth is – literally. Gioia is participating in the national food stamp challenge.

On May 10, Gioia put himself on a weekly food budget of \$28, the average food stamp allotment for

Eligibility in the Food Stamp Program includes work requirements. All non-elderly adults receiving benefits who are able to work are required to be employed or to register for employment. Many must participate in work training and job search programs.

a single recipient. Do the math, and that comes out to a little more than \$1 for every meal. Now on the final day of his week-long challenge, Gioia, to be frank, is hungry.

“It’s been terrible,” said Gioia of his food stamp experiment. “I feel lousy. I’m tired, irritable. I’m hungry all the time, and I just don’t feel like myself.”

White Bread, Cheese and Ramen Noodles

Like roughly half of the U.S. population between the ages of 25 and 60, Gioia quickly discovered the near impossibility of surviving on the \$28-per-week quota.

In his first trip to the grocery store at the start of the challenge, Gioia walked away with a supposed week’s supply of food: two loaves of white bread, processed cheese singles, Ramen noodles, peanut butter and jelly, pasta, tomato sauce, a cucumber, a bunch of carrots, six ears of corn, seven bananas, five oranges and a stick of butter.

Reflecting on his supermarket purchases, Gioia said he ignored nutritional content as well as brand names and simply looked for the cheapest items on the shelf.

“Within a half hour of being in that store, I was no longer looking at calorie content. I wasn’t looking at fat. I was looking at the price tag,” said Gioia. “What I learned so quickly is that when you walk into the store and you only have \$28 to spend for the entire week, the choice has been made for you before you even walk through the door. You’ve got to pick up the circular, find out what’s on sale, and make the best deals you can.”

The councilman’s haul may left him with a paltry \$3.65 in change but, as it turns out, loaded him up with unhealthy amounts of salt, fat and calories. After just four days, the food stamp diet left the normally energetic, 169-pound politician not only “lethargic, irritable and bloated” but also a few pounds heavier. “You realize pretty quickly that you can’t make healthy choices on this budget,” said Gioia. “It’s virtually impossible to live a healthy lifestyle.”

Over the past week, Gioia has discovered that not only is it difficult to make healthy choices, but life on food stamps is also more time-consuming and stressful. “It’s so time intensive. You need to plan your meals out for the entire day. It’s very stressful, actually,” he said. “If you work 14-16 hours a day, you need to bring your lunch with you, you need to bring your dinner with you, and carrying around a soggy peanut butter and jelly [sandwich] all day is not the most appealing option. So, you’ve got to figure out how to get home and make yourself dinner. For me, I work long days, it’s difficult, but for a working mom or someone working two jobs, it’s a huge struggle.”

Bringing Politics to the Diet

Gioia is not the only one who took the food stamp challenge. Over the past few weeks, politicians across the nation have participated in this experiment to raise awareness for the 2007 farm bill, which Congress begins debating at the end of this month.

Due to program cuts made in 1996, food stamps’ purchasing power has decreased by \$480 per recipient annually. These cuts leave food stamp users with two options, as Gioia and his peers discovered: either run out of money by the end of the month or buy less-expensive, less-healthy food.

An outpouring of support for the food stamp challenge has come not only from the New York City’s councilman but from politicians in Texas, Oregon, Illinois, Missouri, Massachusetts, Ohio and Utah. With more than 26 millions Americans relying on food stamps in the United States, these officials signed on to raise awareness of the upcoming bill and as a way to identify with their voters and gain an understanding of what it’s like to live at the poverty line.

“I did this to draw attention to the issue ... but it’s been far more difficult than I thought it would be,” said Gioia.

Many of these senators, representatives and council members hope that their efforts this month will amount to more than just increased publicity. By walking a mile in someone else’s shoes, so to speak, these

officials hope they'll begin to rectify this issue by instituting new measures and initiatives through the 2007 farm bill.

"We could end hunger in New York City and America by taking some simple steps, but what we have to do is build political will, show politicians of all stripes that this is something people care about, that this is a real issue and a solvable problem," said Gioia.

As of today at 1 p.m., Gioia officially completed his challenge. "So today my life goes back to normal, but for a lot of people this is a never-ending struggle," he said. "This shouldn't be a Democratic or Republican issue. This isn't about politics, it's about what's right."

The majority of individuals and families utilize the Food Stamp Program in order to get themselves back on their feet. The average time a household is in on the Food Stamp Program is nine months.

Washington Post

Lawmakers Find \$21 a Week Doesn't Buy a Lot of Groceries

By Lyndsey Layton
May 16, 2007

Rep. Tim Ryan (D-Ohio) stood before the refrigerated section of the Safeway on Capitol Hill yesterday and looked longingly at the eggs.

At \$1.29 for a half-dozen, he couldn't afford them.

Ryan and three other members of Congress have pledged to live for one week on \$21 worth of food, the amount the average food stamp recipient receives in federal assistance. That's \$3 a day or \$1 a meal. They started yesterday.

Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) and Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.), co-chairmen of the House Hunger Caucus, called on lawmakers to take the "Food Stamp Challenge" to raise awareness of hunger and what they say are inadequate benefits for food stamp recipients. Only two others, Ryan and Janice Schakowsky (D-Ill.), took them up on it.

"All of us in Congress live pretty good lives," said McGovern, who ate a single banana for breakfast yesterday and was going through caffeine withdrawal by midday. "We don't have to wake up worrying about the next meal. But there are a lot of Americans who do. I think it's wrong. I think it's immoral that in the U.S., the richest country in the world, people are hungry."

McGovern and Emerson have introduced legislation that would add \$4 billion to the annual federal food stamp budget, which was \$33 billion last year and covered 26 million Americans. The proposal could be incorporated by Congress into the new farm bill.

"We're trying to get this debate going," McGovern said. "There are more working people today getting food stamps than six years ago... There's not a member of Congress that doesn't have hunger in their district."

According to the rules of the challenge, the four House members cannot eat anything beside their \$21 worth of groceries. That means no food at the many receptions, dinners and fundraisers that fill a lawmaker's week.

At yesterday's weekly lunch meeting of the House Democratic Caucus, McGovern was mesmerized by an attractive roast beef sandwich with cheese. He noted the potato chips came in two flavors: sour cream and plain. But his own lunch consisted of some lentils he cooked for himself and brought to work in a plastic container.

This morning McGovern is hosting a fundraising breakfast for his reelection at Bistro Bis, the restaurant in the Hotel George. The catering charge is \$20 per person for the breakfast – nearly

McGovern's entire food budget for this week – but he won't be eating any of it.

And tonight he is to attend a fundraising dinner for Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) thrown at the Georgetown mansion of oil heir Smith Bagley. "I guess I'll just drink tap water," McGovern said.

McGovern and his wife, Lisa, did their food shopping for the week with help from Toinette Wilson, a D.C. resident and mother of three who relies on food stamps. Wilson gave him some tips, but it was still a struggle, he said.

"No organic foods, no fresh vegetables, we were looking for the cheapest of everything," McGovern said. "We got spaghetti and hamburger meat that was high in fat – the fattiest meat on the shelf. I have high cholesterol and always try to get the leanest, but it's expensive. It's almost impossible to make healthy choices on a food stamp diet."

The McGoverns have exempted their two children, ages 5 and 9, from the challenge. "I'm lucky when they eat anything," McGovern said.

At the Safeway, Ryan seemed to grow depressed as he realized the limits of his budget. "It's unbelievable," he said, filling his small grocery basket with peanut butter, jelly and bread. He bought a big bag of cornmeal that he says he'll try to fashion into grits for breakfast and polenta for dinner. And he grabbed some canned tomato sauce and pasta on sale. No money for meat, milk, juice, fresh fruit or vegetables, save for a single head of 32-cent garlic to flavor the tomato sauce.

"I don't know if this is going to make it," said the third-term Democrat, who is 6 feet 3 inches tall and weighs 215 pounds. "By the end of the week, I'm going to be eating cornmeal and strawberry preserves."

Both lawmakers will keep blogs about the experience, McGovern at <http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com> and Ryan at <http://timryan.house.gov>.

Associated Press

Emerson Tries Living on \$3 a Day Food Stamp Budget

By Sam Honanel

May 14, 2007

WASHINGTON – One large box of pasta? Check. Fresh avocados? No way.

On a shopping trip Monday through a Capitol Hill grocery store, Missouri Rep. Jo Ann Emerson tried to figure out how to buy an entire week's worth of groceries, but spend no more than \$1 per meal.

That's the challenge every week for some food stamp recipients who depend solely on the subsidy for their meals.

Emerson, a Republican from Cape Girardeau, Mo., and Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., volunteered to spend seven days on a food stamp budget to highlight the challenges low-income people face in eating a healthy diet at current benefit levels.

"Most people on a day-to-day basis don't think about the fact that there are millions of people in this country who have to make a choice every day about how much they're going to spend on food," Emerson said.

Earlier this month, Emerson and McGovern sponsored legislation that would boost spending for federal nutrition programs - including food stamps - by \$20 billion over five years.

According to the U.S. Agriculture Department, the average monthly food stamp benefit in fiscal 2005 was \$94.05, or about \$3 per day.

While food stamps are meant as a safety net to supplement a family's food budget, many who are unemployed or in financial trouble have to rely completely on government assistance. The "food stamp challenge," sponsored by anti-hunger activists around the country, encourages people to see what it's like to cap a weekly grocery bill at \$21 per person.

Emerson limited her weekly budget to \$33 because her husband, Ron Gladney, would participate for four days as well before going on a business trip.

Even after Emerson spent two hours preparing for the shopping trip by reviewing Safeway prices online, she had to make some tough choices. She loaded up on staples like chicken breasts, spaghetti and tuna.

But she had to leave favorite fruits and vegetables like strawberries and avocados behind. They were too expensive. And snack foods like Wheat Thins? Forget about it.

During the hour she navigated the store aisles, Emerson faced many of the issues that nearly 800,000 food stamp recipients in Missouri confront every day.

She bought hamburger meat higher in fat because it was less expensive than lean beef. She wanted more nutritious whole wheat pasta, but settled on cheaper white flour pasta.

"I'll save over a dollar by blowing my low carb diet," Emerson said.

Low-income shoppers face other hurdles, like not being able to buy sale items in bulk if they use public transportation, said Alexandra Ashbrook, director of the anti-hunger group D.C. Hunger Solutions, who accompanied Emerson on the shopping trip.

"A lot of people don't even live near a large grocery store so they can't go and take advantage of the sale prices," Ashbrook said.

Emerson's one splurge was a small package of blue cheese at \$3.29 to toss in salads. She had to return a carton of eggs to work it into her budget.

Even with a staffer tracking her every purchase with a calculator and notepad, things were tense at the checkout line. With the cash register showing \$32.63, there was still a large bottle of seltzer water left on the conveyer belt. She had to return it.

"This is really a challenge," Emerson said with a sigh. "There are a lot of people in this country who go through this every day."

In addition to helping families make ends meet, the Food Stamp Program also gives back to a state's economy. For every \$5 in food stamps that are used in grocery stores or at local farmer's markets, close to \$10 is generated in local economic activity.

Salem News

Governor Challenges Oregonians to Food Stamp Challenge

This year, the Food Stamp Program is being reauthorized at the federal level through the nutrition title of the farm bill.

April 12, 2007

(SALEM) – Governor Ted Kulongoski has challenged all Oregonians to join him and his wife, Mary Oberst, during "Hunger Awareness Week" from April 23rd-29th, and live off of an average food stamp budget of \$21 per person for the week - or an average of \$3 per day, per person.

"I challenge all Oregonians to experience first-hand what thousands of Oregon families go through everyday," said Governor Kulongoski. "Budgeting just \$1 a meal each day for food, and trying to make that food nutritious, is a difficult task that sadly is a reality for too many Oregonians and their families."

Every April since he took office, the Governor has declared one week Hunger Awareness Week to educate Oregonians about Oregon's hunger problem and to engage the public in becoming part of the solution.

“Many of us will never know what it’s like not to know where our next meal will come from or whether we’ll have enough food in the cupboard to make it through the week,” Governor

Kulongoski continued. “My hope is that by participating in the food stamp challenge, Oregonians will gain a better understanding of what hundreds of thousands of Oregonians experience each month as they try to afford meet their families’ basic needs – transportation, housing, child care, health care – and food.”

For 30 years, the Food Stamp Program has been America’s first line of defense against hunger and food insecurity.

Each month, over 425,000 Oregonians use food stamps to provide meals for their families at home – generating \$855 million of economic activity.

That economic activity supports grocers, farmers’ markets, and communities across the state – contributing toward increased job security, strong wages, business profits and economic vitality.

This year, the Food Stamp Program is being reauthorized at the federal level through the nutrition title of the farm bill.

In addition to adequate funding for the program, the governor next week while in Washington D.C. will be asking Oregon’s congressional delegation to fight against threats to the program coming from the federal administration.

In addition to the food stamp challenge, Governor Kulongoski will be participating in events throughout Hunger Awareness Week highlighting Oregon’s hunger problem and the progress the state is making to address it.

Challenge Template Material

Members of Congress who have participated in the Food Stamp Challenge have kicked off the Challenge by filling out a registration form that lays out the details of how the Challenge will work, such as how long it will last and how much can be spent. Many have also done press outreach to further highlight their efforts and reasons for taking the Challenge. Following is the registration form that Reps. McGovern and Emerson used to serve as an example. Template media assistance is also included.

Additional outreach ideas to consider include posting daily reports on the Congressional Challenge Blog: <http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com>, submitting op-eds to your local newspaper, conducting radio interviews, and doing media outreach around the food stamp budget grocery shopping trip.

The Food Stamp Program is designed to be there in times of need. When economic downturns or natural emergencies occur, such as Hurricane Katrina, the Food Stamp Program can automatically provide benefits to an increased number of people. When need increases or decreases, the funds for the program respond accordingly.

Congressional Challenge Registration

Media Advisory

Press Release

Congressional Challenge Registration

Sample Congressional Food Stamp Budget Challenge Registration

Used by Reps. McGovern and Emerson

The Food Stamp Program helps more than 26 million low-income people purchase food for themselves and their families. The program is designed as a safety net to help ensure people have access to food during difficult times, with the majority of people leaving the program within nine months. More than half of food stamp recipients are children, and eight percent are over 60 years of age.

Members of Congress are taking the Food Stamp Budget Challenge in order to better understand how the program is working on a personal level. For one week, starting Tuesday, May 15, 2007, Members taking part in the challenge will live on the nationwide average food stamp benefit. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which is responsible for administering the Food Stamp Program, the nationwide average monthly benefit in FY 2005 was \$94.05, approximately \$3 a day or \$1 a meal.

All Members of Congress, their spouses and their staff are encouraged to join the Challenge and share their experiences of a week on a food stamp diet.

Participation Guidelines

1. Each person should only spend a total of \$21 on food and beverages during the week.
2. All food purchased and eaten during the Challenge week, including fast food and dining out, must be included in the total spending.
3. During the Challenge, only eat food that you purchase for the project. Do not eat food that you already own (this does not include spices and condiments).
4. Avoid accepting free food from friends, family, or at work, including at receptions or briefings.
5. Please keep track of receipts on food spending and take note of your experiences throughout the week.

An online blog will be available where you can post your progress and findings throughout the Challenge week.

Note: You may find it difficult to complete the Challenge due to schedule or the limited budget. It will still be important and worthwhile to track your experiences.

I, _____, register for the Congressional Food Stamp Budget Challenge and will live on an average food stamp budget from May 15-21, 2007.

Signature

Date

Food Stamp Challenge Media Advisory

Letterhead

Media Advisory

Date

Contact:

Name, Number, Email

Members of Congress Taking on Food Stamp Challenge *Representatives and Senators to Live on \$3 of Food a Day*

What: Press conference with Senators/ Representatives [NAMES] to announce their one-week food stamp budget challenge

When: DATE

Where: LOCATION – Possible options include Radio-TV Gallery-U.S. Capitol/ Local advocacy group location in district or state/ Supermarket

(Washington, D.C.) – On **DATE**, ## Members of Congress will begin a food stamp budget challenge, living on an average food stamp budget of \$3 a day for one week. The goal of the challenge is to highlight the difficulty of obtaining enough food to stay healthy using current Food Stamp Program benefits. The spouse, children and staff of many of the participating Members of Congress will also take part in the challenge.

“Food stamps make a difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in my state and across the country, but not enough of a difference given the small level of benefits,” said Rep./ Sen. [NAME]. “Living on a food stamp budget will give us at least a basic understanding of what it is like to struggle and scrape to put a meal on the table.”

The Food Stamp Program helps more than 26 million low-income people purchase food. Eligibility is based on income and assets depending on household size. Of all food stamp households in FY 2005, 84 percent contained either an elderly or disable person or a child, and these households received 89 percent of all benefits.

Eligibility in the Food Stamp Program also includes work requirements, with all non-elderly adults required to be employed or to register for employment. Many are also required to participate in work training and job search programs.

“The Food Stamp Program is a hand up, not a handout. The majority of people are on the program for nine months or less, with the program helping them to get back on their feet,” Rep./Sen. [NAME] said.

A blog that participating Members of Congress can use to describe their experiences living on the food stamp diet has been created at <http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com>.

The Farm Bill, which authorizes funding for the Food Stamp Program, is due to be reauthorized in Congress this year.

Members of Congress who are participating in the food stamp budget challenge include, (list of all Members participating).

Food Stamp Challenge Press Release

Letterhead

For Immediate Release
Date

Contact:
Name, Number, Email

Rep./Sen. [NAME] (and Family) to Live on Food Stamp Budget *Members of Congress to Live on \$21 Worth of Food for One Week*

(Washington, D.C.) Rep./ Sen. [NAME(S)] (Party-State) today pledged to live on only \$3 worth of food a day – the average Food Stamp Program benefit level – the week of DATE. Members of Congress are taking part in the challenge to raise awareness of how difficult it is to purchase a healthy and nutritious diet on a food stamp budget.

“By living on an average food stamp budget for a week we won’t come close to knowing the worry and anxiety that millions of low-income people feel every day when they’re not sure where their next meal is coming from, but we do hope to shine a light on the importance of the program and the need for increased benefits,” said Rep./Sen. [NAME].

Established in 1939, the Food Stamp Program helps more than 26 million low-income people purchase needed food each month. Eligibility is based on income and assets depending on household size. Eligibility in the Food Stamp Program also includes work requirements, with all non-elderly adults required to be employed or to register for employment. Many are also required to participate in work training and job search programs.

The Farm Bill, which includes funding for the Food Stamp Program, is due to be reauthorized in Congress this year.

“We believe we have a moral responsibility to end hunger in America,” Rep./Sen. [NAME] said. “The Food Stamp Program plays a vital role in providing nutrition assistance to low-income families, but the current benefit level makes it very difficult for many recipients to make ends meet.”

[Include information about your shopping trips for food in Washington, D.C. or in your District, possibly with a local food stamp advocate or recipient].

The Food Stamp Program encourages people to transition from welfare to work by supplementing their food budgets and gradually decreasing benefits as income increases. Almost 30 percent of food stamp households have at least some earnings, and half of all new food stamp participants will leave the program within nine months. Of all food stamp households, 84 percent contained either an elderly or disabled person or a child, and these households received 89 percent of all benefits.

In addition to helping families make ends meet, the Food Stamp Program also gives back to a state’s economy. For every \$5 in food stamps that are used in grocery stores or at local farmer’s markets, close to \$10 is generated in local economic activity.

“Food stamps are used in grocery stores and farmer’s markets throughout our state, with those dollars going back into the local community. It’s a program that’s good for our families and good for our state,” Rep./Sen. [NAME] said.

A blog that participating Members of Congress can use to describe their experiences while living on the food stamp diet has been created at <http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com>

Contacts and Resources

Congressional Food Stamp Challenge Blog

<http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com>

For more information on joining the Food Stamp Challenge:

House Hunger Caucus

Office of Congressman Jim McGovern (D-MA, co-chair of Hunger Caucus)
438 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515
202-225-6101

Contact: Kate Mitchell or Keith Stern; kate.mitchell@mail.house.gov
<http://mcgovern.house.gov>

Food Research and Action Center

1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 540, Washington, D.C. 20009
202-986-2200

Contact: Ellen Vollinger, evollinger@frac.org
<http://www.frac.org>

The Hatcher Group

4340 East West Highway, Suite 912, Bethesda, MD 20814
301-656-0348

Contact: Laura Hayes, laura@thehatchergroup.com
<http://www.thehatchergroup.com>

For more information on the Food Stamp Program:

Food Research and Action Center

1875 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 540 , Washington, D.C. 20009
202-986-2200

Contact: Ellen Vollinger, evollinger@frac.org
<http://www.frac.org>

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Food and Nutrition Service
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsp>

American Public Human Services Association

810 First Street, NE, Washington, D.C. 20002
202-682-0100

Contact: Larry Goolsby
<http://www.aphsa.org>

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

820 First Street, NE, Suite 510

Washington, D.C. 20002

202-408-1080

Contact: Stacey Dean

<http://www.cbpp.org>

America's Second Harvest—The Nation's Food Bank Network

One Constitution Ave, NE, Washington, DC 20002-5655

202-546-7001

Contact: Eleanor Thompson

<http://www.secondharvest.org>



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