

Food Stamps, the politics of hunger in the U.S.

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Tuesday, January 31, 2012

It comes as no great surprise that Food Stamps and other means-tested public programs for the poor have emerged as campaign issues during the current election cycle. Expect more of the same as the Republican presidential primary race tightens and the candidates attempt to outduel each other on matters of reducing federal spending and eliminating dependency on “big government.”

Newt Gingrich’s recent labeling of President Obama as “the best food stamp president in American history” follows a time-honored Republican tradition of demonizing programs for the poor and vilifying their recipients – campaign tactics that hearken back to Ronald Reagan’s bromides on “welfare queens” and other stereotypes of aid recipients.

SNAP 101

After unemployment insurance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – formerly the Food Stamp Program) has historically been the most responsive federal program in assisting families during economic downturns. SNAP is a cornerstone of the nation’s public health safety net and, simply put, our most important anti-hunger program.

The full cost of SNAP benefits is paid by the federal government, with the costs of administrating the program shared between Washington and the states, which operate the program. In Nevada, the average monthly benefit per person is \$123.

Unlike most means-tested benefit programs, SNAP is only available to households with low-income individuals and limited financial assets. Currently, SNAP eligibility is limited to households whose net income is less than or equal to the federal poverty line (about \$18,500 a year or \$1,545 per month for a family of three) and who possess assets of \$2,000 or less (or \$3,000 for households with an elderly or disabled family member).

It’s the economy, stupid

Some of the harshest public health impacts of poverty and unemployment are hunger and the attendant degradations of seeking nutrition assistance. Two thirds of households in Nevada receiving food assistance have gone entire days over the past year without eating because there was not enough buy food – “food insecurity” that undermines health and adds to the stress of living in poverty.

Hunger and food insecurity have all grown considerably worse during the prolonged recession and slow recovery that has hammered our nation and state. Since the onset of the recession in late 2007, median household income in Nevada has declined by 7 percent or about \$4,000 per

household. Consequently, both the number and percent of the state's population living in poverty have grown.

The number of Nevadans living in poverty jumped from 270,000 or 10.7 percent of the state's population in 2007 to nearly 400,000 or 14.9 percent in 2010. During the same time, the number of children under the age of 18 in poverty has grown from 99,000 to 144,000 – currently, over one in five children in Nevada now live in poverty.

Two factors are responsible for the growth of SNAP caseloads – either more households are qualifying for the program and enrolling, or because a larger share of eligible households are signing up.

Like other states hardest hit by the recession, Nevada has seen higher-than-average SNAP caseload increases as the number of unemployed workers has ballooned. Simply put, caseload growth in Nevada is largely a product the nearly 200,000 jobs shed by Nevada businesses over the past five years and the corresponding growth of SNAP-eligible households.

Despite possessing one of the lowest participation rates of eligible persons in the country, the average monthly number of Nevadans receiving SNAP benefits has skyrocketed from 122,224 individuals in 2007 to nearly 325,000 in 2011. In other words, while only 51 percent of eligible Nevadans receive SNAP benefits (a ranking of 49<sup>th</sup> among US states), average monthly SNAP caseload has increased by 165 percent since the onset of the recession.

#### The politics of hunger

SNAP and local nutrition programs like the Food Bank of Northern Nevada have helped make severe hunger in Nevada and our nation rare. The fact that Gingrich and others choose to make a political issue of hunger is predictable, but no less cynical, considering the hardship faced by those whose economic circumstances have been battered over the past couple of years.

The recently released tax returns of candidates Gingrich and Romney suggest that hunger and privation have escaped their households during our extraordinarily deep and prolonged recession. Bully for them.

Millions of low-income, hard-working Americans have been considerably less fortunate and struggle to put food on the table on a daily basis. These individuals and families need the support of policymakers, certainly not their derision, if we're to make hunger history, safeguard the public's health, and right our economic ship.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine and President of the Nevada Public Health Association.