

November 28, 2013

Food an every-day challenge for Montclairites

Wandering the Lackawanna Station Pathmark with a notebook, pencil and coupon circular laid out in the front of my cart, I weaved in and out of the aisles, keeping a full running tally.

For the next week I would participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Challenge, an initiative in which participants live off of the equivalent of food stamps for a brief period of time, typically a week, in an effort to better understand hunger in our nation.

Those taking the SNAP Challenge are to limit their food consumption to \$4.50 per day, according to FeedingAmerica.org, or \$31.50 for the week. However, with recent cuts to the program that began this month, I chose to look for a more realistic figure.

For the 2012 fiscal year, the average monthly benefit for a single New Jersey resident was \$133.26, according to data on the United States Department of Agriculture website, down from \$138.03 in 2010. As the average individual will receive roughly \$11 less per month due to SNAP cuts, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, I limited my spending to a conservative \$25.10, money spent predominately on beans, pasta, rice and bread.

Errors in communication

While the SNAP Challenge is a temporary effort for participants, it is a way of life for an estimated 873,000 New Jerseyans, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

During the week, I met a Montclair woman raising a middle-school aged son while living off of unemployment.

"Mary," not her real name, 42, said that she had worked consistently since age 14 before losing her job in social work. Turning to government assistance, Mary told me that, as she collects \$800 a month in unemployment, she was allotted just \$16 per month in food assistance. Following the end of the government shutdown, Mary said that she was set to receive an increase in assistance. With the cut in SNAP funding, that has not come. Mary was left to wonder how she will make it to the New Year as her unemployment runs out.

While food shopping, Mary said that she typically purchases one or two items at a time and will consume them until they run out. For instance, she will buy cereal and milk and live off that for a period of time and then switch to bread and cheese.

The Montclair woman voiced frustration with the poor lines of communication she has been subjected to, saying that, as someone unfamiliar with seeking government assistance, the process has been difficult to navigate. Mary said that she has been eligible for government assistance since April, but was not notified until August.

"[Lawmakers] don't understand that with the flick of their pen, they're really affecting people. It's not what I should eat today, it's what I can eat today," she said.

The continuing struggle

"What we hear is that the recession is over, but folks on the ground haven't seen a turnaround," Laura Bruno, public relations manager for the United Way of Northern New Jersey, told me last week. "The numbers are still high in terms of [people] struggling. Absolutely, the job numbers in New Jersey are still bad. I don't think we're going out on a limb saying that it's a struggling job market here."

Bruno and Durelle McPherson, director of the United Way of Northern New Jersey's Family Success Center at the United Way Building, 60 South Fullerton Ave., work with the area's struggling population. During community resource days, which are listed on the center's website at unitedwaynnj.org, McPherson and her staff help clients obtain the assistance available to them, such as SNAP.

McPherson said that some clients have told her that they wait until community resource days to apply for food stamps, avoiding lines in Newark and East Orange that stretch down the block and, at times, are cut off before visitors are able to apply.

Another client the center worked with had thought she had unsuccessfully applied for food stamps online, McPherson said. With the center's help, the woman was able to receive \$800 in six-months-worth of retroactive payments.

The Family Success Center also puts together information packets directing visitors to local food pantries, soup kitchens and grocery discounts.

Taking the packets used to be a point of shame for some clients, McPherson said. Now, the packets are sought after.

Among the resources available to locals is Toni's Kitchen, at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 73 South Fullerton Ave.

Stopping by the local soup kitchen during their Friday lunch rush, I caught up with its director, Anne Mernin. Toni's Kitchen has recently seen an increasing number of visitors with senior citizens and individuals who work, but still cannot make ends meet, as the most rapidly growing populations. Mernin said that, by all indications, both populations will continue to grow.

Mernin said that she and her rotation of 350 volunteers are cognizant of the strong possibility that they may be offering their visitors' most well-rounded meal of the day, and take the responsibility seriously. The director said that the kitchen also uses the meal as the means to lead into conversations about mental, social and physical health, with professionals on hand to assist in a variety of different capacities free of charge.

Describing the cuts in SNAP as something that will further stress a population living on very constrained budgets, Mernin said that she felt the onus fell on Toni's Kitchen to step up its efforts, supplying visitors with food to bring home and increasing offerings.

"Food is not an optional item," Mernin said.

For those looking to help out, Mernin said that there are volunteer and donation sign-ups on Toni's Kitchen's website, tk.slechurch.org.

Similarly, the United Way is now conducting its Holiday Fund through its website, according to Bruno. Money raised through the fund goes to year-round emergency assistance for clients who may fall on difficult times and resources helping them find long-term security, Bruno and McPherson said.

A BALANCED DINNER PLATE

Meena Mahadevan, assistant professor in the Health and Nutrition Sciences department at Montclair State University, has experience working with those living on limited funds, having developed nutrition information for the Food Bank For New York.

Mahadevan said that a common error she has seen in those living off of food stamps is that, while transferring to a high-carbohydrate diet for financial reasons, the wrong carbohydrates are chosen. Many types of breakfast cereal and white bread are, while inexpensive, loaded with sugar, leading to weight issues, she said.

Another error Mahadevan has seen is customers flocking to lean proteins and packaged food and then, by month's end, running out of money.

Mahadevan said that the human body only needs between 10 and 35 percent of its daily caloric intake to be protein-based. Proteins can be found in legumes, vegetables - she recommended broccoli, spinach and potatoes - and even whole grains, she said.

The professor suggested the consumption of whole grains, with three or four grams of protein per serving such as a slice of bread or half cup of cooked rice, vegetables such as broccoli, spinach or potatoes, with three or four grams of protein per serving and legumes with seven to 10 grams of protein per serving, which equates to about a half cup of cooked beans.

Canned tuna and salmon, Mahadevan said, also offer 30 grams of protein apiece for just a dollar or two.

REDEFINING OUR NEEDS

This past Saturday I completed my week on the SNAP Challenge. I had two key takeaways.

In the week prior to the challenge, I spoke with U.S. Rep. Donald Payne Jr. (D-10) who, due to his struggle with diabetes, was only able to last a day on the SNAP Challenge. Payne said that just a day eating the highly processed, filling meals that are so readily available and inexpensive, left him with a headache. He underscored that nobody on food stamps is living high "on the hog."

Now, with a very rudimentary understanding of food stamps, I feel safe in echoing that sentiment. I was surprised by the general fatigue and irritability I experienced, despite filling my stomach with relatively healthy, non-processed items.

A lot of that, as Mahadevan pointed out, could be rectified with better nutritional planning. Still, I was surprised by the difficulty in eating three healthy, low-cost meals a day and can't imagine how much having a child dependent on me and my choices would exacerbate that difficulty.

The second takeaway is more superficial, but perhaps easier to relate to. I think it's safe to say that all of us take some things for granted: grabbing a coffee on the way to work, or a slice of pizza when strolling down the avenue.

It is easy to dismiss those living on the tightest constraints as needing to reassess their priorities and give up small luxuries for nutrition and sustenance and, of course, there is validity in that. What I ponder, too, though, is how dependent we have all become on those luxuries.

It's worth asking, what exactly do we "need?" And if we don't ask this of ourselves during this season - when?

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