

Hunger

In 2014, 48 million Americans, including more than 15 million children, lacked access to a dependable and adequate source of food.¹ Although the recession may be over, the number of Americans still struggling with this basic need remains unchanged. Hunger is a result of lack of resources. Unemployment, low wages, and high housing costs have been identified as the major causes of hunger. More than a million New Jerseyans, over 374,000 of them children, lack food security, according to the latest comprehensive data. The problem of hunger is compounded by New Jersey's high cost of living, which makes about 36% of those struggling with food insecurity ineligible for federal nutritional assistance.² In addition, cuts to the benefit level of those already receiving assistance further threaten thousands of New Jersey households. Only when people have food adequate to their nutritional needs can New Jersey have a safe, stable, and productive future. Below are essential programs to ensure adequate nutrition assistance.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Supported primarily by federal funding, SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program, has been a first line of defense against hunger. Although New Jersey has taken steps to expand eligibility for SNAP and streamline the application process, only about 77% of those eligible actually participate in the program. New Jersey lags considerably behind the National average of 83% of eligible people accessing SNAP benefits. If the participation rate rose just five percentage points, 57,000 more people would have \$22.4 million more per year to purchase nutritious food.³ On November 1, 2013, all New Jersey SNAP households saw a benefit decrease of approximately 5%. This included about 1 of every 10 residents in New Jersey, whose benefits, after the cut, averaged less than \$1.40 per meal.⁴ In July 2014, legislation enacted through the Farm Bill further affected those New Jersey residents who also receive the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). As many as 159,000 households may have seen a reduction in their SNAP benefits of as much as \$90 per month.⁵ These cuts disproportionately affected senior and disabled households.

Child Nutrition: School lunches have been a crucial source of nutrition for millions of children. Other federally funded programs offer school breakfast and after-school/summer nutritional programs to help vulnerable children. These programs, however, are seriously under-utilized in New Jersey. For instance, the school breakfast program, which provides free or reduced-price breakfasts for children in need, has a proven track record of enhancing academic performance, improving child health, and reducing disruptive classroom behavior. Despite the progress made in recent years, only 44% of New Jersey's 533,000 eligible students received school breakfast, leaving 296,000 children unserved and millions of dollars in federal funds on the table.⁶ In fact, if New Jersey school districts served breakfast to just 70% of the students who receive free or reduced-priced lunches, districts would collect an additional \$21.9 million in federal funding.⁷ Similarly, while New Jersey's federally-funded summer food programs served free meals to more than 81,000 children in 2014, that number is only 19% of the children that were eligible. If New Jersey raised its participation in the summer meals program to 40%, an additional \$6.7 million would be available to help alleviate childhood hunger across the state.⁸

Food Pantries: For many households, a food package from a local pantry helps supplement monthly income so that other basic expenses can be met. Food banks have seen a continuing rise in demand. A recent study by Feeding America noted that 62% of feeding programs in New Jersey saw an increase in demand over the previous year. However, in the current economic climate, donations from private sources, food drives, and charitable foundations are in decline.⁹

We ask that you invest in the people of New Jersey by:

- Supporting the expansion of School Breakfast both fiscally and administratively. By investing state funds to reinstate supplemental funding of the program, New Jersey can provide fiscal incentives to districts to adopt a “breakfast after the bell” approach to school breakfast and increase participation by eligible students.
- Expanding access to the SNAP program by applying to the Federal Food and Nutritional Services program for available waivers that increase eligibility to 200% of the federal poverty level, so that struggling families and senior citizens can access appropriate food assistance.
- Addressing the processing delays being experienced by SNAP applicants at the county level, focusing both on improved business models, and on hiring adequate frontline staff to process applicants in a timely manner.
- Applying for available waivers and instituting SNAP procedures that would ensure documentation of household expenses. County staff must be properly trained to adequately understand the SNAP regulations and the deductions that allow recipients to claim the full benefit to which they are entitled. Given the recent changes, it is more critical than ever that those eligible claim all of the allowable deductions (housing, medical, utility, dependent care) to boost federal benefit levels.
- Reinstating Supplemental Nutrition Assistance for Seniors (SNAS), an alternative/simplified program for SSI recipients.
- Expanding state funding for the State Supplemental Food Program (funded at approximately \$6 million).

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¹Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew Rabbitt, Christian Gregory and Anita Singh. 2015. “Household Food Security in the United States in 2014,” <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err194.aspx>

² Feeding America. 2015. “Map the Meal Gap 2015: Food Insecurity Estimates at the County Level,” <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap.aspx>.

³ See, USDA Food and Nutrition Service Mid-Atlantic Regional Office Fiscal Year 2014 Report, Spotlight on New Jersey.

⁴ Whiten, Jon. New Jersey Policy Perspective. 2013. <http://www.njpp.org/blog/nearly-1-million-new-jerseyans-will-see-cuts-to-food-assistance-this-week>.

⁵ Rosenbaum, Dorothy, Stacy Dean and Robert Greenstein. 2013. “Cuts Contained in SNAP Bill Coming to the House Floor Would Affect Millions of Low-Income Americans,” <http://www.cbpp.org/files/9-6-13fa.pdf>.

⁶ Advocates for Children in New Jersey. 2015. “Food For Thought: 5th Annual School Breakfast Report,” http://acnj.org/downloads/2015_10_15_School_Breakfast_Annual_Report.pdf

⁷ Woo, Nicole, Hewins, Jessie, Burke, Michael, Fitzsimmons, Crystal. 2015. “School Breakfast Scorecard, School Year 2013-2014,” http://frac.org/pdf/School_Breakfast_Scorecard_SY_2013_2014.pdf

⁸ Peter Chen and Nancy Parello. 2015. “Food for Thought: How to Expand Summer Meals to NJ Kids,” http://acnj.org/downloads/2015_07_01_nj_summer_meals_report.pdf.

⁹ Urban Institute and Westat for Feeding America. 2014. “Hunger in America 2014 State Report for New Jersey”