The Facts about State Food Assistance

The state legislature reduced funding for State Food Assistance (SFA) by half for the current biennium. A court order is in place prohibiting the benefit reduction, however, pending the outcome of an equal protection and due process lawsuit on behalf of SFA recipients. Gov. Christine Gregoire has again proposed to eliminate the program.

Myth: Only a few people are affected by eliminating the State Food Assistance Program, and they are all adults.

Fact: Hunger is rising, and is affecting more Washington residents each day. Of the 31,100 people who either receive State Food Assistance or benefit indirectly from the program by living in a household where another family member receives it, 12,500 are children.

Myth: In many State Food Assistance households, someone else receives federal Basic Food benefits, so cutting SFA won’t hurt the family.

Fact: Removing benefits from one or more family members can easily push the entire family into hunger. All too often, Basic Food is not enough; 52 percent of the households who use it still experience food insecurity.

Myth: We don’t even know who is on the program; we’re not sure if they are legal immigrants.

Fact: We know exactly who is on the program. Recipients of State Food Assistance are not undocumented or illegal immigrants. Many are green card holders who have been in the U.S. less than five years and who are caught in the same economic conditions as their neighbors – conditions that have significantly increased participation in federal Basic Food. Others are domestic violence or crime victims assisting local law enforcement, applicants for asylum in the U.S., temporary residents like citizens of Haiti unable to return home, and citizens of Micronesia or the Marshall Islands who are allowed to live and work in the U.S.

Myth: Caseloads are decreasing in benefit programs, signaling the end of the recession and reducing the need for food assistance.

Fact: Basic Food (food stamp) caseloads continue to rise each month, increasing by 8% between July 2010 and June 2011. More than 1 million Washingtonians currently receive food assistance. Hunger in our state rose by 90 percent from 2008 to 2010, and the need continues to increase.

Sources: State Department of Social and Health Services, Economic Services Administration, Community Services Division; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.
Myth: *State Food Assistance is administration-heavy; eliminating the program will result in staff reductions and cost savings.*

Fact: State Food Assistance is very efficient. It piggybacks on the federal Basic Food (food stamp) program and is administered by DSHS’s local Community Services Offices that also administer WorkFirst, Disability Lifeline and other programs. SFA accounts for only **two percent** of the administrative activities of these offices.

Myth: *Other federal nutrition programs can fill the gap if the program is terminated.*

Fact: State Food Assistance is the only protection some Washington families have against hunger. The federal food stamp program, and the related SFA program, are the nation’s number one defense against hunger because they are available to anyone with net income below the federal poverty level. **Other programs have more limited scopes:** assisting only K-12 school-age children, infants and children under 5, or pregnant women. These programs were not designed to substitute for basic food assistance. Shifting a limited amount of resources to these programs would increase costs and make more children hungry.

Myth: *State Food Assistance has no impact on the broader community.*

Fact: **State Food Assistance is a form of economic stimulus.** Families that buy food are putting money back into their local communities. State Food Assistance benefits, like federal Food Stamp benefits, go **directly** to community grocery stores across the state, making a $9 local economic impact for every $5 in benefits spent on food, according to the USDA. Eliminating the program would cause local communities to miss out on over $100 million in economic impact in the 2011-13 biennium.

Myth: *The federal preliminary injunction currently in effect leaves the legislature with no option but to terminate the program.*

Fact: **The legislature has several options.** The preliminary injunction, which the state is currently appealing in the Ninth Circuit Court, prohibits the state from terminating SFA or reducing benefits. If the appeal is turned down, the injunction stays in effect until the class action lawsuit is concluded. If the court overturns the injunction on both equal protection and due process grounds, lawmakers could change or end the program. If the court upholds the injunction on due process only, the state may correct process errors and proceed to change or end the program. If the court upholds the injunction and finds with the plaintiffs on due process grounds, it could ultimately overturn any changes in SFA.
Myth: Food Banks and faith-based charities can easily fill the gap left by eliminating SFA.

Fact: Many of our state’s leading food providers, religious leaders and non-profit directors know that the private non-profit sector can’t replace SFA. Here’s what they have to say:

“As an organization working towards ending hunger, we are alarmed that the number of Washington state families experiencing hunger nearly doubled from 2008 through 2010. We strongly urge the legislature to preserve the State Food Assistance program. It is a critical safety net for those in need and without it, the charitable hunger response system cannot meet the rising need.”

–Shelley Rotondo, Executive Director
Northwest Harvest

“Food Lifeline is deeply concerned about proposed elimination of the State Food Assistance Program. Pantries in King, Snohomish and Pierce counties, where most State Food Assistance Recipients live, have worked hard to respond to rising community need over the past several years, but their hard work alone cannot end hunger. We urge the legislature and Governor to preserve the State Food Assistance Program.”

–Linda Nageotte, President and CEO
Food Lifeline

“The religious community cares deeply about its role in meeting the human needs of our communities in this state. But its capacity pales in comparison to government. Lutheran Public Policy Office, and its religious partners, believes that one of the most important priorities of state government is to provide for the welfare of those who reside in this state.”

–Rev. Paul Benz, Director
Faith Action Network

“The State Food Assistance program is a lifeline for thousands of people in King County. Additional investments of time and money from a variety of funders, community members and volunteers have helped record numbers of people facing hunger throughout the recession. But the continuing, and likely growing, challenges require a strong partnership with our state government. The Governor and the Legislature must preserve this critical program.”

–David Okimoto, Senior Vice President for Community Services
United Way of King County

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