



Lawmakers Take Food Stamp Challenge In One Of The Worst States For Food Stamp Recipients

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Starting next Monday, a bipartisan pair of New Jersey Assemblywomen will take the “SNAP Challenge” and attempt to make it through a week on a food budget of less than \$2.50 per day. The move comes amid criticism of the state’s handling of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) from both federal and local observers.

Nancy Muñoz (R) and Mila Jasey (D) are the latest lawmakers to attempt the challenge, which dozens of politicians around the country have participated in over the past several months. The goal of the challenge, as initially proposed by the hunger charity network Feeding America, is “to get a sense of what life is

like for millions of low-income Americans facing hunger.” The challenge partially emulates the experience of relying upon federal food assistance to eat.

But actual low-income families face many further challenges that can't be simulated in the SNAP Challenge. Muñoz and Jasey are volunteering to spend a fixed amount of money they already have on food, but for New Jersey's poor, even that meager amount is hardly guaranteed to arrive. The state ranks second to last among all SNAP administrators at giving food stamps applicants a speedy response. Despite a legal requirement to notify applicants within 30 days, more than a quarter of those who apply for aid in New Jersey do not hear back from the state within that window. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has warned New Jersey to shape up by next spring or lose federal matching funds for implementing SNAP.

Other states and localities that fail to comply with the timely response requirement have been sued by groups like the National Center for Law and Economic Justice. The group has active lawsuits against Nebraska and Georgia state agencies over their handling of food stamps applications, and its website reports that a multi-year litigation against Indiana helped raise the state's timely response rate from just 70 percent to 95 percent.

New Jersey's SNAP problems go beyond slow responses from bureaucrats, however. Millions of people around the country who are eligible for SNAP do not receive it, and New Jersey has the fifth-lowest rate of participation among eligible residents of any state. Just two out of three New Jerseyans who can get federal food assistance do so — a lower percentage than in states notorious for their poor handling of poverty such as Mississippi, where 79 percent of SNAP-eligible households are signed up for the program. Gov. Chris Christie (R) also declined to maintain the so-called Heat and Eat program that streamlines the application process and reduces overhead costs for states by linking home heating aid and food stamps. That decision will cost New Jersey's needy families nearly \$170 million in federal food money each year, according to a left-leaning New Jersey think tank.

Food stamp participation is falling nationwide after spiking to historic highs amid the trauma of the Great Recession. But need is still very high, with nearly 50 million Americans living on the brink of hunger in food-insecure households. Despite that elevated need and protests from food charities that they are already operating beyond capacity, Congress passed and President Obama signed a 1 percent cut to SNAP into law earlier this year. The bill also expanded farm insurance subsidy programs that have far higher rates of fraud and overpayments than food stamps and that primarily benefit well-off corporate landowners and insurance companies.

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