

LOCAL

85,000 households losing \$156 million in SNAP food assistance aid. Is RI prepared?

Zane Wolfgang Newport Daily News

Starting March 1 monthly SNAP disbursement to RI will be reduced to the pre-pandemic level of \$27.7

The MLK Center food pantry in Newport is serving 30% more clients than it was last this time last year

Rep. David Morales of Providence introduced legislation to offset the federal reduction by using general revenue or ARPA funding

In tandem with the rising price of groceries, the impending reduction of Rhode Islanders' federal SNAP benefits by a whopping \$156 million per year could spell disaster not only for the state's neediest residents, but also for the fragile ecosystem of food pantries that feeds them.

As paradoxical as such a drastic reduction in federal food assistance for low-income citizens seems given rising food insecurity across the state and skyrocketing grocery prices across the country, starting March 1 the monthly SNAP disbursement to Rhode Island will be reduced from just over \$40 million back to the pre-pandemic level of \$27.7 million, and households on SNAP will see their monthly benefit drop by an average of \$153.

At the same time, the 85,000 households in Rhode Island who receive SNAP benefits brace for a drastic reduction to the federal aid they rely on to pay for their groceries every month, the state's food pantries are already seeing enormous increases in need. Heather Hole Strout, executive director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center in Newport, told The Daily News the food pantry is serving 30% more clients than it was last this time last year and has seen an increase in clients every month for the past eight months in a row.

Without state action, food pantries will bear the brunt

In the absence of any significant action by Gov. Dan McKee and the Rhode Island General Assembly, the task of filling the hunger gap resulting from the recurring monthly loss of

\$13 million in funding will fall almost entirely on food pantries like the MLK Center and the RI Community Food Bank.

“Forty-one percent of our clients last year (received SNAP benefits), which is about 1,600 people,” Hole Strout said. “The average household is going to lose about \$153 per month in SNAP benefits when this ends in just a few weeks.”

Ninety-eight percent of the MLK Center food pantry’s clients earn less than \$34,000 a year, and a significant portion of those who do not receive SNAP are members of Newport’s Hispanic community who do not qualify for federal benefits due to a lack of documentation.

“People on SNAP use our pantry to fill the gap,” Hole Strout explained further. “What that means for us is more and more people are going to be relying on us for more and more help, and that comes with a huge cost...We’re obviously concerned first and foremost for the people in our community who are losing this benefit, but we’re also concerned for our center and our food pantry to be able to keep up with the additional demand this is going to put on us.”

Lending a hand: MLK Center sees rising demand for food assistance: How they're attacking the problem

Hole Strout stated only 3% of the MLK Center’s budget is publicly funded through municipal, state and federal support combined. She said the center was able to access some ARPA funds which were distributed through the Rhode Island Foundation, but has had less luck with state funding and receives “very minimal” civic support from the communities it directly serves – including zero civic support contributions from both Tiverton and Little Compton, despite the MLK Center’s on-site food pantry and mobile food pantry feeding some of the neediest residents in both of those towns.

Senior citizens will be among those most affected

“It’s really scary, and I think it’s going to affect seniors the most,” said Hole Strout. “If you look at a senior who was getting \$200 per month, that probably still wasn’t covering the cost of their groceries for a month...If you go from that to \$20 per month, it is not even going to cover you for a day. It is extreme.”

Citing pre-pandemic data, the USDA says 47% of SNAP recipients across the country receive Social Security benefits. Almost all of those households saw their baseline SNAP

benefit reduced in correlation to the 2023 Social Security COLA (Cost of Living Adjustment), which was the largest increase in 40 years. Theoretically, a single-person household on a fixed Social Security income could go from receiving the maximum benefit of \$281 per month in February to the minimum benefit of just \$23 in March, with no additional income or food security program except the local food bank to fill the gap.

Andrew Schiff, CEO of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, said it was important to point out that the SNAP reduction is not going to be this drastic for every senior citizen, but did acknowledge recipients of the minimum SNAP benefit of \$23 a month are typically “senior adults whose Social Security is within the guidelines so they can qualify for SNAP, but their income is high enough that they get the minimum benefit – so that is true; if you’re going to look at who the likely people are to receive a minimum benefit, they are senior adults, on Social Security, living alone.”

He also acknowledged \$23 does not provide much purchasing power at the grocery store these days given the rising price of food: the USDA has forecast food prices to rise between 3.5% and 4.5% in 2023, on top of the 10.6% increase from November 2021 to November 2022.

What is the state of Rhode Island doing to address this \$13 million monthly gap?

After speaking briefly with RI Department of Human Services (DHS) public affairs officer James Beardsworth, The Newport Daily News emailed a list of six detailed questions to both the DHS and Governor McKee’s office seeking information on the potential to follow models used in Massachusetts to offset the loss or use ARPA funds.

“To prepare for the announcement by the Federal Government to end COVID-19 SNAP emergency allotments, DHS has been working closely with the Governor’s Office, the RI Food Bank, and community partners across the state to help ensure that important messaging, awareness, and next steps have been widely communicated. At this time, the agency continues to explore financial options that would provide some relief for these individuals,” Beardsworth said in an email response. “We are also looking forward to a new SNAP incentive pilot program (similar to Massachusetts) that is in development and will be announced in greater detail in the near future. Funding for this was provided in last year’s budget.”

Among that important messaging is a flyer on the DHS website entitled “16 tips for saving money at the supermarket.” Tips from the state government for SNAP recipients include “check your garbage” to make sure you haven’t thrown away food that is still good, avoid “checkout temptations” like candy bars in the checkout aisle, and “avoid shopping while hungry.”

How can I save money while shopping? 6 easy tips to follow if you need to cut costs

Additionally, Beardsworth highlighted a Food Donation Tax Credit proposed for the Fiscal 2024 recommended budget — which would be retroactive to Jan. 1, 2023 — for food products raised or grown in Rhode Island that are donated by food producers to qualified food banks in the state. He also encouraged SNAP beneficiaries to log on to dhs.ri.gov to make sure their information is accurate and up to date in order to ensure they are receiving the maximum benefits possible for their situation.

Officials in the governor's office referred to the response from DHS when asked for comment.

On the General Assembly side, Rep. David Morales of Providence introduced House bill 5799 to offset the federal reduction by using general revenue or ARPA funding to increase the monthly SNAP allotment by \$95 per month from July 1 through Dec. 31.

What is SNAP and how does it work?

SNAP is the largest federal nutrition assistance program. It provides benefits to families, seniors, and other individuals with low incomes, as well as people with disabilities living on fixed incomes.

Once someone is enrolled in SNAP, an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card is issued to the person and they can use it like a debit card to purchase eligible food in authorized stores. Each month the card is reloaded with benefits, and unused benefits do roll over to the next month. How much a household receives depends on its size and particular financial situation. In Rhode Island, 85,000 households receive monthly SNAP benefits, including households comprised of only one person.

What is the emergency SNAP issuance, and why is it coming to an end?

Prior to the start of the emergency SNAP issuance in March 2020, Rhode Island received \$27.7 million in SNAP benefit funding every month, spread across 85,000 households of varying size and need. Congress temporarily increased SNAP benefits when the federal government officially declared COVID-19 to be a public health emergency in March 2020. The emergency issuance provided an additional \$13 million per month to those households, raising the total pool of SNAP funding for Rhode Islanders to \$40.7 million.

All SNAP households received extra benefits after the first of the month to bring them to either the maximum household amount, or if they were already receiving the maximum amount, an additional \$95. With the passage of the Congressional Consolidated Appropriations Act in 2023, the public health emergency declaration which provided the rationale for the additional benefit was ended, and SNAP recipients will no longer receive the additional allotment starting on March 1.

In April, the suspension of the time limit for able-bodied adults without dependents will end, reinstating the rule that able-bodied adults ages 18-49 who do not have dependents and are not pregnant cannot receive SNAP benefits for more than three months within a three-year period. SNAP temporary student exemptions that allowed certain students pursuing higher education at least half-time to be eligible to receive SNAP benefits will also be phased out starting in April, meaning students attending an institution of higher education such as a college, university, or trade/technical school more than half-time will not be eligible for SNAP.

“I think that the political solution is in Washington,” said Schiff, “because this is too big a gap for any one state, including Rhode Island, to take on by itself. This spring Congress is debating the Farm Bill – the act that federally authorizes SNAP – and this would be the opportunity for Congress...to increase the level of SNAP benefits. That would be the solution.”

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