

Food banks brace for millions of users

Officials expect lack of SNAP benefits to hit hard

Sarah D. Wire
USA TODAY

At a food bank in Des Moines, Iowa, clients who used to come occasionally are now regulars.

The number of visitors has steadily risen in the last two years as COVID-19 pandemic relief programs ended, said Andrea Cook, executive director of the Johnston Partnership, which runs the food bank.

And now, benefits received through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, aren't expected to arrive in full in November because of the government shutdown.

The shortfall would leave 42 million people scrambling to find sustenance, and food banks like Cook's are bracing nationwide for a wave of new clients desperate for a meal.

Two federal judges on Oct. 31 told the U.S. Department of Agriculture to distribute its reserves, which would provide about two-thirds of the usual funds and delay distribution by at least a few days. The rulings are likely to be appealed.

"We're in this kind of world right now, trying to plan for what happens if everybody who has come needing food from us over the course of the year comes in the same month," Cook said.

The Johnston Partnership normally sees 2,500 to 3,000 individuals a month. Many are working, trying to balance multiple jobs and are between the ages of 18 and 59 years old, she said.

Cook is trying to stay optimistic, but she knows food banks aren't able to replace SNAP.

"I try to be a glass half-full kind of person, but I am wondering if we're going to find out what the limitations are to the charitable food and security network in the community," she said. "I feel like we're going to get to January and we may be surprised to find that there could be some organizations that are not able to keep up."

The delay in benefits, announced by the USDA, mark the first time federal



Volunteers pack boxes of food at the Greater Lansing Food Bank in Lansing, Michigan, on Oct. 27. MATTHEW DAE SMITH/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

food security has not arrived in the program's more than 60-year history.

Food banks and pantries said they are expecting a massive influx of need, which could stretch the already strained food safety net beyond what it can handle.

Food banks and programs are already coordinating, sharing information and food, said Laura Glaza, executive director of the Glenn House Food Pantry in the Chicago suburbs. And they know that people want to help.

"The bottom line right now is donating money is probably the most impactful thing that people could do to help food banks and food pantries," Glaza said. "Volunteer your time and spread the word, let people know about what we're facing and encourage other people to make a difference too."

She knows her staff and volunteers could feel the full force of SNAP recipients' panic.

"We're worried about (Nov. 3)," she said. "(Nov. 3) is going to be a very stressful day for our staff and for the neighbors who we're trying to get food to."

Linda Nageotte, president and COO of Feeding America, which provides millions of meals worth of food support to organizations across the country, said food banks and pantries need all available support.

"We need everyone who is in a

position to give and to support to do so," Nageotte said. "Please donate to your local food bank. You can sign up to volunteer. We need lots of hands and hearts engaged in our work to help us get food out to families who need it."

But mostly, they need the government to reopen, federal workers to be getting their paychecks and SNAP to be fully funded, she said. She urged people to call their members of Congress.

On Oct. 27, the USDA said it can't use the more than \$5 billion in its contingency fund account to pay for SNAP, although the agency has used it in at least two previous shutdowns, including the shutdown from December 2018 into January 2019, which lasted 35 days during President Donald Trump's first term.

A U.S. Senate vote Oct. 28 failed to reopen the government – for the 13th time – as Americans endure what is already the second-longest shutdown in history. Both the House and Senate are gone for the weekend as Democrats and Republicans blame one another.

The USDA and House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-Louisiana, have said they cannot legally provide the benefits. Democrats say the Trump administration can use the contingency fund and tap into other money to make the November payment.

On Oct. 31, two federal judges ruled that the USDA must fund benefits in November. One judge gave the federal

government the weekend to decide how they will do so, while the other judge ordered the agency to use contingency funds. The decisions could be appealed to the 1st Circuit before going into effect.

The USDA has historically used contingency funds to ensure benefits were not interrupted during shutdowns.

The lack of notice has left millions of recipients and food banks scrambling.

Glaza said her food pantry in DuPage County, a wealthy suburb of Chicago, is going to be open more hours and let more people in at a time. They will go from 300 opportunities for people to shop the last week of October to 436 the first week of November.

The pantry already serves 10% of the county's residents, a number she expects to jump if 76,000 people lose SNAP benefits.

To prepare for the expected spike "we have taken everything we had in our inventory and given it out to the pantries so that they are prepared for (Nov. 1)," she said. "Honestly, this week alone we've seen an uptick, sometimes twice as many, three times as many people coming to the pantries."

As of the last week of October, they were already purchasing food to replenish warehouses for the second week of November and are doing additional distributions of boxes of shelf stable foods in areas with high SNAP participation.

In fiscal year 2025, the average monthly benefit per person in the SNAP program was \$190.59, according to the USDA. For households, the average monthly benefit was \$356.41 in total.

Around 12% of the more than 342 million people in the United States rely on the federal program, which provides low-income families with monthly benefits to afford healthy food.

According to the USDA's fiscal year 2019 annual report of demographics of SNAP users, 36% of recipients were White, and 26% were Black. It also shows that 43% of participants were children, 32% were nondisabled, nonelderly adults, 16% of participants were age 60 or older, and 10% were nonelderly adults with disabilities.

Contributing: Bart Jansen and Terry Collins, USA TODAY; F. Amanda Tugade, Des Moines Register

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