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# Cutting SNAP and a Call to Action (Letter to the Editor)

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# Cutting SNAP and a Call to Action

I submitted the following letter this morning to the editor of the Charleston/Mattoon Journal-Gazette/Time-Courier.

Effective November 1, 2013, extensions to the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) implemented in response to the great recession expired and the maximum monthly benefit for an individual receiving SNAP assistance was reduced by \$11.00 from \$200.00 per month to \$189.00 per month. For a family of four, the maximum benefit was reduced by \$36.00 from \$668.00 to \$632.00 per family. Despite these being the *maximum* benefit, few individuals and families actually receive the full amount; rather, according to the U.S.D.A., the typical benefit level in Illinois is approximately seventy percent of this allotment, meaning individuals receive, on average, \$129.00 per month, and families of four receive, on average, \$430.00. When all said and done, these typical benefit amounts allow for \$1.53 per meal per individual or \$5.12 per meal for a family of four.

These figures are not without local importance to us in Charleston, Mattoon, and the greater East-Central Illinois Region. Based on my research through the Coles County Poverty Data Project (<http://colescountypovertydatapoint.wordpress.com/>), one in five individuals in our county have an income low enough to be officially counted as poor and nearly two in five persons have an income that places them at-risk of going to bed hungry, not knowing from where their next meal may come, and if obtained, that this meal is nutritionally adequate. Moreover, one-quarter of our Coles County families are food insecure with incomes below 185% of poverty—approximately \$42,182 for a family of four with two children. However, SNAP benefits only cover those with incomes up to 130% of the federal poverty line, approximately \$29,641 per year; these families are now making ends meet with lower benefits. Historically, food assistance in our country has always functioned as a supplement to a person's or family's income and other resources; the mentality of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility is a major thread in our collective consciousness. However, Coles County has a median household income just over \$40,000, which is ten-thousand less than the national figure and nearly thirteen-thousand less than the state of Illinois; despite comparable levels of unemployment, the economic resources of our families lag behind the state and the country.

As my research shows, 15% of Coles County families have incomes low enough to qualify for SNAP benefits, but also exposes a food assistance gap, affecting 10% of all families and 6% of families with children, who are at imminent risk but without immediate access to public relief. This gap, the families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty line, are chronically at-risk of missing meals and waking in the morning not knowing whether there will be an adequate breakfast. These families, without publicly funded support, are exactly those who receive the help they need from private and not-for-profit programs and services in our community. While some governmental programs exist for special populations living in food insecure households, such as free and reduced-price meal programs for public school students and a food and nutrition program for pregnant women and new mothers of infants, there is no standard public program for the general population.

Yet, as the holiday season begins, and public support wanes, there will be rise in those seeking assistance from what limited resources will be available: community programs sustained not by federal dollars, but by the generosity of citizens and volunteers. Individuals and families are increasingly turning to places like

the Mattoon Community Food Center, Charleston Area Churches Food Pantry, and Standing Stone Community Center to obtain some level of food security.

Eastern Illinois University's Hunger Action Team is using the month of November as a call to action to educate and advocate for those who are poor, hungry, and face insecurity each day. Through food drives, movie screenings, public educational activities, a SNAP Challenge for persons to test their resolve living on a food stamp budget, and the serving of hot food to those in need, this dedicated group of students, staff, and faculty are taking on hunger and food insecurity in our community. You can learn more about these events at <http://www.eiu.edu/volunteer/> and refer to the information under the "Hunger Challenge 2013" menu.

The time is right to address the issues of poverty and hunger in Coles County. More important, as we prepare for our holiday feasts with family and friends, we should not only pause to just remember those in need, but to do something to alleviate the impacts of poverty and food insecurity. Our community is depending on it.

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